

THE PRESSURE OF PAIN

by Ray C. Stedman

Dr. Francis Schaeffer has said that the first argument of the Gospel is not, as we often think, that Jesus died for our sins. Nor is it, as we are sometimes told, "God loves us, and has a wonderful plan for our lives." Dr. Schaeffer says that the first argument of the Gospel is, "God is there." There is a God, and he is in control of life.

This is the great lesson of the book of Job, which we are confronted with right from the very beginning: The presence of God in the life of a man, even though he is going through very severe trials. The trial itself proves the existence of God and his presence with him.

As we have already seen in the opening chapter of this book, Job is being subjected to a very severe test. Satan has been permitted by God to take away all Job's possessions in an attempt to prove that if a man's possessions are taken away, he will curse God to his face. But Job has survived that first cycle of tests -- tests that took away all his wealth, all his possessions, even his children. Job is left crushed and broken but, nevertheless, full of faith. When we reached the end of Chapter 1 last week, we saw that the score was 1 - 0 in favor of Job against Satan.

Chapter 2 opens with another round in the test, and the first three verses tell us that God again initiates action against Job:

Again there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the Lord. And the Lord said to Satan, "Whence have you come?" Satan answered the Lord, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." And the Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil? He still holds fast his integrity, although you moved me against him, to destroy him without cause." {Job 2:1-3 RSV}

This reads much like the first chapter, where we have the same glimpse behind the scenes into the heavenlies, where God and Satan are holding a conversation about Job. (I hope that, as we move on in the book of Job, we will not forget these opening chapters, for they give us a heavenly view of earthly trials.)

Viewpoint makes a tremendous difference. I was at a church yesterday, listening to a young man leading us in songs and playing his guitar. He told us about a meeting he had recently where he was to sing for some high school students. His four-year-old daughter asked, "Daddy, where are you going?" He replied, "I'm going to go sing for the kids." She asked could she come so he took her along. When they got to the meeting, he was surrounded by all the high school kids and his little girl looked up at him and said, "Well, Daddy, where are all the kids?" He said, "Well, there they are, out there." She looked at him and said, "Daddy, those aren't kids -- those are baby sitters!"

So you see what a difference viewpoint makes. Here in this chapter we are given a viewpoint of Job and his suffering, one that Job himself is not permitted to have. We are given this because we too are not permitted this viewpoint in times of trial. We do not know what is going on behind the scenes in our lives, with our pressures and trials. We do not know what has transpired between Satan and God about us, but we are given this reassurance that something does happen, and that we are being subjected to a test. This is very revealing and very important.

The thing that I think is important here is to see that God initiates further testing of Job. God challenges Satan, and says, "Well, what do you think of Job now? You moved me against him without a cause, and I allowed it to happen. But now what do you think? There is none like him on the earth. He is blameless and upright, and

he turns away from evil. You haven't moved him an inch. What do you think now?" And Satan replies by asking for a change in the rules Verses 4-6:

Then Satan answered the Lord, "Skin for skin! All that a man has he will give for his life. But put forth thy hand now, and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse thee to thy face." And the Lord said to Satan, "Behold, he is in your power; only spare his life." {Job 2:4-6 RSV}

When Satan says "Skin for skin!" he is using basically the same argument that he used in the first chapter. His philosophy was (and is) that men are basically self-centered creatures. When you attack them directly, they will give way, and they will give up their faith, their religion, anything, to save their own possessions. Now that argument has been fully answered. God has allowed Satan to test Job, and though he lost his family and all his wealth, Job remains steadfast in his integrity, refusing to charge God with wrong.

It is really a very sobering thing to realize that the tests that come into our life are aimed at getting us to curse God to his face, to tell him that he is wrong, that he does not keep his promises, that he is not the kind of a God that we have been told he is. If you take note of your own life you will recognize that, when under pressure, the thing you want more than anything else is to cry out in protest to God that he is not keeping his promises. That is where Satan always aims. He has the same philosophy and the same objective today: he wants us to curse God, as he wanted Job to curse God.

But Satan asks for a change in the rules because, in effect, he says to God, "You didn't go far enough. You put a boundary about Job and said I couldn't touch his body. That's the problem. It's true that a man may give up his possessions, but one thing he will never give up is his health. You let me get at him, let me destroy his health, and he will give up his integrity and his faith."

"But put forth thy hand now, and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse thee to thy face." And the Lord said to Satan, "Behold, he is in your power; only spare his life." {Job 2:5 RSV}

Once again there is a divine limitation to the power of Satan, but this time God moves the boundaries closer. He says, "You can touch him." In fact, when Satan uses the phrase, "touch his bone and his flesh," he asks for access to the total humanity of Job. We still use that phrase today, flesh and bone, to speak of the totality of our humanity -- not only our physical body, but our emotional life as well, our conscious and subconscious thinking and reacting. And not only our soul, but our spirit as well. Satan is asking for access to this man Job, to touch him body, soul and spirit -- and he proceeds in that order. That constitutes the argument and basic assault recorded in the rest of the book of Job. Satan knows what he is after. He knows that if he can get at Job in every part of his being, he thinks that he can shake Job's faith and cause him to turn from his trust and confidence in God, and curse him to his face.

Last week when I finished my message on the first chapter of Job, two young Englishmen came up and challenged me. They would not accept the story of Job as an historical event and they could not believe there ever was a man named Job who went through those things. I asked them why not. Their reply was, "If that story is true, then God is unconcerned about human life. It pictures God as ruthless. Job's whole family was taken from him. We can't accept this as an historical record."

In talking with them, I realized that they were struggling with the same feelings that many people struggle with today. They see God as nothing more than a man, who thinks and acts and has no more rights than a man. It was obvious that they thought that if a man took life like this, he would be justifiably charged with murder and cruelty. It did not occur to them that God could not be charged with these things because in his hand is all of life. He determines the length of life for everyone. I tried to point out to these young men that if Job's children had died from sickness they would not be as free in charging God with ruthlessness and cruelty. But because they were taken suddenly, it seemed unfair.

This very morning my wife and I were subjected to something that gave us a taste of the atmosphere of this book of Job. We received a phone call informing us that a beautiful young woman whom we met recently had

been found dead. She and her husband, both Christians, were operating a Christian retreat at Lake Tahoe, and they had befriended our daughters, Susan and Linda, who are living up there.

The young woman and her husband were out for a walk beside a mountain stream and she sat down for a rest, while he went ahead to climb a rock. When he came back, he found the body of his wife floating in the stream, drowned, leaving five children motherless. Because they were such beautiful young people, and she was a very unusual mother, it hit us hard. We felt our hearts protest, "Why should this happen? What is God doing, taking a mother away from five children who need her desperately?"

That is why we have the book of Job, to show us that there are reasons and purposes in these trials and sufferings that we do not see. Job could not see what was going on behind the scenes, and neither can we. And yet God knows, and God is working out an object. He has a purpose for it, and it is a proper and right purpose that will end up manifesting more fully the love and compassion of his heart. The test of every trial is always to this end.

So Satan is given access to Job, and in the next section we see the physical test that comes, Verses 7-9:

So Satan went forth from the presence of the Lord, and afflicted Job with loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. And he took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes. Then his wife said to him, "Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God, and die." {Job 2:

Here is the first attack on the body of Job. Some think it was leprosy; other scholars think it was a form of elephantiasis which not only covered the body with running, putrefying sores, but also caused the members to swell up and become bloated and distorted. Whatever it was, it rendered Job a pitiful spectacle, a repulsive hulk of a man, swollen and disfigured and hurting with these running sores.

In my early twenties I went through a siege of boils that lasted about two years. They came mostly one at a time, for which I was grateful, although once I had two or three. Nothing is more painful, I think, than a boil, and it is the kind of pain that cannot easily be relieved. It throbs away day and night, and it was a severe test to my faith to have even that limited trial.

But here is Job totally covered with these agonizing sores. He was not only physically afflicted, but he was also painfully humiliated. He ends up sitting in the ashes, scraping the pus from his sores with a broken piece of pottery. To cap it all, the one to whom he ought to have been able to turn for emotional support turned against him. His wife said to him, "Do you still hold fast your integrity?" I can see that her faith has crumbled under this attack. She no longer believes that God is loving thoughtful, and just. She sees this as proof, as many of us have done in times of trial, that God has forsaken his promises, that the Bible is not true.

How many times I have come to comfort people going through trials, and had them say to me, "I tried these promises, I tried believing God, but it doesn't work." Have you ever said that? That is getting very close to what Satan was trying to get Job to say: "Curse God, and die." He used Job's wife as his instrument, and just as Eve became the instrument to get at Adam in the Garden of Eden, the assault upon Job's emotional life comes through his wife.

She advises him to do two things: "Give up your faith, apostatize. Curse God." (Actually, in the Hebrew, the word is "bless" God, but it is properly translated "curse" because the word "bless" is dripping with sarcasm.) "Bless God, and die." She is clearly suggesting suicide: "It would be better for you to take your life than to go on like this." So poor Job, bound by physical pain, sits in humility with a disfigured body, and suffers from a sense of emotional abandonment by his mate.

I do not know if women fully understand how much their husbands depend on them. I think husbands often draw emotional strength from their wives far more than either they or their wives realize. Here was a severe attack addressed to the very soul of Job, in which he felt his wife abandoning him, advocating that he turn from his faith and renounce his God.

But now in verse 10 we get the results of this second round of tests:

But he said to her, "You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips. {Job 2:10 RSV}

Job's rebuke is a very gentle one. He did not say, "You foolish woman!" He said, "You speak as one of the foolish women." He is not attacking her, rather, he is suggesting that this is a temporary lapse of faith on her part and that for the moment she has begun to repeat the words of stupid, foolish women who have no knowledge of the grace and glory of God. In that gentle rebuke you can see something of the sturdiness and tenderness of Job's faith. In this great sentence he again reasserts the sovereignty of God: "Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?" Job's wife had the philosophy that life ought to be pleasant and if it was not, there was no use living it. That philosophy is widespread in our own day, and a mounting suicide rate testifies to the universal acceptance of it.

But this book is given to show us that life is not to be lived on those terms. The reason we are here is not necessarily to have a good time. There are meaningful objectives to be attained in life, even when it all turns sour. When the pressure comes, when living is no longer fun, life is still worth living. A philosophy that wants to abandon everything as soon as things become unpleasant is a shallow, mistaken, distorted view of life.

Job reaffirms that. "Shall we not take both good and evil from the hand of God?" We take his joy and his pleasure, the pleasant things of life with gladness and gratitude. If he chooses to send something that is difficult, shall we then abandon that gratitude and begin to curse him in protest, because life is suddenly different than we thought it would be? The reason we are here is not merely that we might have a good time, and this is taught everywhere in the scriptures. God, in his grace and glory, does give us many, many hours of joy and gladness and pleasure and delight, and it is right for us to give thanks. But do not abandon that when the time of pressure comes for that is what Satan wants us to do. He wants us to begin to complain and to protest to God; to get upset and angry and resentful; to stop going to church, or to stop reading the Bible. That is what Satan's whole attack in our lives is aimed at doing.

Well, Job has won. The score is now 2 - 0, in favor of Job. But Satan is not through. Remember that he obtained permission from God to assault this man in every area of his being. He not only has taken Job's children and all his possessions, but he has also taken away his health, and all the pleasure of his physical life. And Satan has also assaulted Job's soul, and made him feel abandoned by his wife.

Satan now proceeds to assault the final stronghold of all: the spirit of Job, the ultimate reality of his life. In the closing verses of this chapter we see him beginning to move up his heavy artillery to assault the citadel of Job's faith. You notice that the big guns that he seeks to employ are rather unusual, Verse 11:

Now when Job's three friends heard of all this evil that had come upon him, they came each from his own place, Eliphaz the Temanite Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. They made an appointment together to come to condole with him and comfort him. {Job 2:11 RSV}

Now we are set for the major argument of this book, and the major attack on the faith of Job comes not through his physical trials, but through an attack on his spiritual relationship with God himself. And it comes through the hands of well-meaning friends. That is the irony of this. Here are misguided but sincere friends who want to help, and hope they are helping, but actually they are an instrument of Satan to assault the castle of Job's faith, and almost cause it to collapse.

We will learn more about these men as we go through the arguments that they bring forth. It is obvious that they had to come from distant places, and that a good deal of time has elapsed while Job has been suffering physically. Word had to come to his friends about Job's disaster and they had to agree together by sending messengers to one another to come together at an appointed time and visit Job. So weeks, if not months, have probably gone by while Job is subjected to this severe pressure upon his faith. And when the friends arrive,

they are utterly shocked at what they see, Verses 12-13:

And when they saw him from afar, they did not recognize him; and they raised their voices and wept; and they rent their robes and sprinkled dust upon their heads toward heaven. And they sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great. {Job 2:12-13 RSV}

They can hardly believe their eyes! This monstrous, repulsive hulk of a man -- could he really be their dear old friend Job? Was this Job, sitting huddled in a heap of ashes, scraping himself with a broken piece of pottery, swollen and disfigured, utterly repulsive to look at? Could this be the man they had known and loved? They are so shocked by this that their actions strongly suggest that they think Job is on his deathbed. They held, in effect, a funeral service for him. They did what was customarily done at funerals -- they raised their voices, they mourned and wept. They tore their coats, sprinkled dust on their heads, and finally ended up sitting on the ground around Job, observing him in silence for seven days.

Now while they were sitting there, they were thinking, and what they thought is going to come out in the arguments they give in the next section of the book. (We will take these rather rapidly.) It is enough for us to see at this point that while they were waiting in silence around Job, they came to the conclusion that he was suffering under the hand of God for some terrible sin he must have committed, and that it was right for God to make him suffer this way. Their hearts, therefore, were hardening against Job. They had come to comfort him, but they are confronted with the feeling that many of us have had, that there is not much they can say because in their heart of hearts, they believe that Job deserves what he is getting. So the silence probably means that they are wondering how to say this, how to begin, how to put it in terms that Job will listen to.

In our next study we will hear Job's own plaintive cry of protest against God, and we will begin to read what these friends have to say as they try to explain to Job what he is going through. We will find out that much of our philosophy will be reflected in what they say.

But let us never forget what we have been shown at the beginning of this book: it is God who is doing this, ultimately, and he has an aim in view. And because he does not tell us at this point what it is, we, too, must suffer through this with Job. We must feel to some degree with him what he is feeling, and sense the protest, the anguish, the emptiness of his life. Nevertheless, we must remember that there is an answer, God does have a reason, and it will be made clear as the book unfolds.

I do not know whether this catches you where Job is or not. Sooner or later we all come to these times of trial and testing, for in some degree God visits them upon us. If you are going through such a time, I think this book will be of great help. But if you are not, just be thankful that God has given us this book, and be thankful that, for the moment at least, he has chosen to maintain his protection, his loving care over us.

For, as we have seen, if Satan had his way, we would all perish. But God has guarded us and kept us. If he temporarily lifts his hand, we have assurances everywhere in the Word of God that it will never be more than we can handle. Job proved that. It never was more than he could stand, although he thought it was. Sometimes this is the way we feel. We think God is going too far, that he is pushing us too hard, but he never does. He is teaching us our limits. This is what the book of Job will do for us as we go through it.

Prayer:

Our Father, we are sobered by this book. We see something of the blood and tears that life can confront us with, and of the ruthless pressures to which we can sometimes be subjected, and still be in your will and in your hand, guarded and guided by your love. Lord, we do not understand that, but that is because our understanding is so limited. We pray that as we go through this book we will have our eyes opened to the kind of a God we deal with, and to the ways you work, and what the ultimate meaning will be in our own lives. Teach us now by your Spirit, in the name of Jesus our Lord. Amen.

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