

IS IT BETTER TO DIE?

by Ray C. Stedman

Job is the story of a man undergoing a very severe testing of his faith. As we saw in Chapters 1 and 2, Job was unaware that he was the subject of a test between God and Satan, and he experienced a tremendous series of calamities that wiped out all that he held of value. In one tragic day he lost all his possessions, and his seven children. Subsequently, he lost his health, and was afflicted with a loathsome disease that left him covered with boils from head to foot, disfiguring his countenance, and turning him into a very repulsive looking man. To top it all off, his wife turned against him, and she suggested that he curse God and commit suicide. And yet, despite all these pressures, Job is still trusting in the mercy and love and grace of God and he still refuses to do what Satan is trying to get him to do: curse God and die.

The book has already proven a rebuke to many of us who have been confronted with far less provocation, but have done what Job refused to do. We have cursed God, taken him to task, resented what he is doing, and refused to acknowledge him as a just and good and loving God.

At this point in the book of Job, Satan moves up his big guns. He leads three of Job's friends to come and comfort him, and when these friends arrive they are shocked at what they see. Here is their dear friend Job, respected, admired, a most attractive man, now an empty hulk, sitting on an ash heap, scraping the pus from his sores with a piece of broken pottery. They sit in silence for seven days before they can muster up enough courage to speak to Job about his troubles. But it is also apparent, as we get into this story, that while they have waited in silence they have begun to suspect that perhaps Job is going through something he really deserves, and we will see how Satan uses this to increase his torment and anguish.

Chapter 3 begins around a dialogue between Job and his friends, and this dialogue constitutes a major part of the book. (The reason why it is given to us will be revealed in this discussion between Job and his three friends.) The chapter opens with a bitter lament from Job. Weeks have gone by since he was first afflicted with this painful disease, and God does not seem to explain what he is doing. Job knows nothing of what we have been informed of in the opening chapters, so, baffled and buffeted and tormented with physical misery, he now opens his mouth with a tremendous cry in which he longs for death.

I do not know if you have ever felt that way, but I think there have been times when I wished I could have dropped out of the scene entirely and gone home to heaven. This week we received a card from a friend that referred to a trial we were going through. She said, "You may feel so very helpless now, which indeed you are for the most part. But I know when you are out there, and the crutches one by one are stripped from you, his words and his love stand before you so irresistibly, so constant -- until Jesus becomes your only alternative. Otherwise, death would be the only seemingly logical relief." That is where Job is found in the opening part of this book, crying out for death, cursing the day on which he was born.

In this chapter we will find that he asks three very poignant questions. The first one is, "Why was I ever born?" Listen to the beautiful, eloquent way he expresses that, Verse 1:

After this Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. And Job said:

**"Let the day perish wherein I was born,
and the night which said,
'A man-child is conceived.'
Let that day be darkness!
May God above not seek it,
nor light shine upon it.
Let gloom and deep darkness claim it.
Let clouds dwell upon it;
let the blackness of the day terrify it.
That night -- let thick darkness seize it!**

let it not rejoice among the days of the year,
let it not come into the number of the months.
Yea, let that night be barren;
let no joyful cry be heard in it.
Let those curse it who curse the day,
who are skilled to rouse up Leviathan.
Let the stars of its dawn be dark;
let it hope for light, but have none,
nor see the eyelids of the morning;
because it did not shut the doors of my mother's womb,
nor hide trouble from my eyes." {Job 3:1-10 RSV}

This book is written in marvelous poetry and I am going to try to read as much of it as I can so that we do not miss the wonderful eloquence of it. Here Job is saying that he hopes his birthday will be forgotten. He is looking back to the day of his birth and, although he cannot change that, he is saying, "May the anniversary of it be ignored. Let it be a day that is darkened, let no one rejoice in it. Let it be a day of cursing instead of blessing." The reason Job gives for this outcry is in Verse 10, "because I was born on that day; it produced me." You can see at this point how his life has become so miserable that he longs for death. Even all that he has enjoyed in the past seems of no value in the face of this tremendous anguish that he must endure.

Now this is given to us in order that we might understand that others have gone through trials far worse than we have. Although Job comes very close to cursing God, he never does. He does curse the day of his birth, and he curses what God has allowed to happen. You can see how the pressure is increasing, and Job is beginning to break and crumble under it, as this unceasing, unexplained anguish goes on.

I do not think anything is harder for us to bear than unexplained trouble. If we could see some reason for what we have to go through, we could endure it much more easily. But when trouble seems to be pointless, and nothing is accomplished by it, it is a terrible strain upon the soul. This is what Job is experiencing, so he cries out, "Why was I ever born?"

In Verses 11-19, his second question is, "Having been born, why didn't I die at birth?"

"Why did I not die at birth,
come forth from the womb and expire?
Why did the knees receive me?
Or why the breasts, that I should suck?" {Job 3:11-12 RSV}

"My life has been totally meaningless," Job says. "It would have been better to have died when I was born." Then he goes on to give us his view of death. Now this is revealing, because, as we will see, this is a view of death that is much more primitive than what we have in the New Testament. It is a much more natural view, one that many people have who do not know anything about the Bible at all. Verse 13:

"For then I should have lain down and been quiet;
I should have slept; then I should have been at rest,
with kings and counselors of the earth
who rebuilt ruins for themselves,
or with princes who had gold,
who filled their houses with silver.
Or why was I not as a hidden untimely birth, [an abortion]
as infants that never see the light?
There the wicked cease from troubling,
and there the weary are at rest.
There the prisoners are at ease together;
they hear not the voice of the taskmaster.
The small and the great are there,
and the slave is free from his master." {Job 3:13-19 RSV}

Job views death as a time of rest, a period of solitude and quiet after the tumult and trouble of life. I think

many people see death that way. In the play *Our Town*, there is a very vivid segment that describes a visit to the cemetery where the dead are talking among themselves. This is their view of death: the absence of all opportunity to fellowship with others; all is quiet and peaceful. These verses indicate that Job's understanding of life after death needs to be enlightened a great deal, and that is one of the reasons why this suffering came into his life. At the end of the book Job's view of death is quite different than it was at the beginning.

Job's third question is, "Why can't I die now? Why was I born? But, having been born, why didn't I die when I came out of the womb? And since that didn't happen, why can't I die now?" Verse 20:

**"Why is light given to him that is in misery,
and life to the bitter in soul,
who long for death, but it comes not,
and dig for it more than for hid treasures;
who rejoice exceedingly,
and are glad, when they find the grave?
Why is light given to a man whose way is hid,
whom God has hedged in?
For my sighing comes as my bread,
and my groanings are poured out like water.
For the thing that I fear comes upon me,
and what I dread befalls me.
I am not at ease, nor am I quiet;
I have no rest; but trouble comes." [keeps coming] {Job 3:20-26 RSV}**

Job's argument is, "What's the purpose of my life? Of what use is a life that is so filled with misery that you can do nothing but suffer and feel anguish? My life produces only fear and trouble, so it would be better to end it now." Many people feel that way. I do not think Job is thinking of suicide -- he is asking God to take him home. There is no purpose to life, he says, when it is not enjoyable. That is a very common argument, and one of the reasons we have been given this book is to help us understand that life can still have a great deal of meaning even when it looks absolutely useless.

At this point we get the first of the replies of the three friends of Job. One was named Eliphaz, one was Bildad, and the third was Zophar. These friends all come with the same solution to the problem, but they approach it in three distinct ways, according to their personalities. As I read through this, I tried to dub them in terms that describe the approach each takes: "Eliphaz the Elegant," "Bildad the Brutal," and "Zophar the Zealous."

Eliphaz is the first speaker, evidently the oldest, for there is a smoothness about him, and a courtesy (at least at the beginning) that indicates that he has learned to say not very pleasant things in gracious ways. Bildad is brutal and plainspoken. He just lays it out on Job and does not care what the effect is. Zophar is compassionate and emotional, and he speaks with a great deal of impact, trying to move Job. Eliphaz's argument breaks down into six main points, and when you hear what he has to say, you will know what these three friends will be saying all through the rest of the book.

He starts out first by saying to Job, in effect, "Follow your own advice." Chapter 4:

**"If one ventures a word with you, will you be offended? [Notice the courtesy with which he starts!]
Yet who can keep from speaking?
Behold, you have instructed many,
and you have strengthened the weak hands.
Your words have upheld him who was stumbling,
and you have made firm the feeble knees,
But now it has come to you, and you are impatient;
it touches you, and you are dismayed.
Is not your fear of God your confidence,
and the integrity of your ways your hope?" {Job 4:2-6 RSV}**

Basically Eliphaz is saying, "Job, you have been a counselor to many people, and you have been able to put

your finger on their problem and help them to deal with it. You delivered them, you found the key to what was troubling them and helped them to face up to it. Now follow your own advice. Your turn has come. You've been caught in the same kind of problem you have helped others with, so now follow your own advice and you will be relieved." Then Eliphaz goes on to put very plainly just what that problem is, as he sees it, and, in Verses 6-11, you have his basic principle of life:

**"Think now, who that was innocent ever perished?
Or where were the upright cut off?
As I have seen, those who plow iniquity
and sow trouble reap the same.
By the breath of God they perish,
and by the blast of his anger they are consumed.
The roar of the lion, the voice of the fierce lion,
the teeth of the young lions, are broken.
The strong lion perishes for lack of prey,
and the whelps of the lioness are scattered." Job 4:7-11 RSV}**

Eliphaz uses a pride of lions to describe the natural strength of human beings -- it appears to be strong, but in God's judging hands it is broken. His argument is: the righteous are never punished; only the unrighteous suffer. "Where did you ever see an innocent man perish?" he asks Job. "Where did you ever see an unrighteous man succeed?" His argument is, clearly, that Job's problem is caused by his own willful sin, something that Job is hiding. And this will be the basic argument all through the book: "There is something wrong, Job. If you will only admit it you'll be all right."

I remember years ago, picking up a Christian magazine that specialized in attacking men in public ministry, such as Billy Graham. The editor of the magazine said of Dr. Graham, who had just had a certain illness, that it was a judgment of God on him because he associated with the wrong kinds of people. But what fascinated me was that in the next issue the editor announced that he himself had fallen down a stairs and broken his leg! His explanation was that Satan was attacking him, trying to stop his God-given ministry! This is so characteristic of humanity. We all see clearly that the suffering of others is caused by their sin, while our suffering is always caused by something else.

Eliphaz goes on to tell Job that if he will fear God and admit his sin, things will be all right. He breaks it down into two parts. First, he says, he learned this truth in a vision that came to him at night. It is a spooky kind of passage, Verses 12-21:

**"Now a word was brought to me stealthily,
my ear received the whisper of it.
Amid thoughts from visions of the night,
when deep sleep fails on men,
dread came upon me, and trembling,
which made all my bones shake.
A spirit glided past my face;
the hair of my flesh stood up.
It stood still,
but I could not discern its appearance.
A form was before my eyes;
there was silence, then I heard a voice:
'Can mortal man be righteous before God?
can a man be pure before his Maker?
Even in his servants he puts no trust,
and his angels he charges with error;
how much more those who dwell in houses of clay,
whose foundation is in the dust,
who are crushed before the moth.
Between morning and evening they are destroyed;
they perish for ever without any regarding it.
If their tent-cord is plucked up within them,**

do they not die, and that without wisdom?" {Job 4:12-21 RSV}

That is an argument based upon the fact that infinite justice rules the universe. Eliphaz sees God as a God of holiness and purity so spotless that even the angels of God stand defiled before him. What chance would a man have to stand and claim to be sinless? In a sense, that is good theology. And as we will see before the end of the book, it really was a problem that Job was facing. He did not understand all his own heart, and at the end he confesses that fact. But the trouble with Eliphaz's argument was that he thought it had to be based on some known but hidden sin that Job was unwilling to confess. Eliphaz sees God only as a God of justice. He sees nothing of love and compassion and forgiveness or of discipline and training or the Father's heart of God. So because of his unbalanced theology even though what he says is true, it becomes false in its application.

That is where a lot of error creeps into Scripture. We can quote a lot of good factual truths about the Bible, but, when we try to apply them out of a false premise, we end up wrong. That is why people who make a habit of going around with a Bible quoting verses to others end up beating them over the head with these verses and being very wrong in the process. Charles Spurgeon, the great English preacher used to speak about "preachers who went around with a theological revolver in their ecclesiastical trousers," ready to blast anybody who got in the way.

Now in Chapter 5, Verses 1-7, Eliphaz argues that trouble comes only from sin.

**"Call now; is there any one who will answer you?
To which of the holy ones will you turn?
Surely vexation kills the fool,
and jealousy slays the simple." {Job 5:1-2 RSV}**

That is what is wrong. You are vexed and jealous, and that is why you have trouble.

**"I have seen the fool taking root [apparently prospering],
but suddenly I cursed his dwelling [it all fell apart].
His sons are far from safety, they are crushed in the gate,
and there is no one to deliver them." {Job 5:3-4 RSV}**

What a low blow! That is a hidden reference to the calamity that befell all Job's children in one day. Eliphaz is suggesting that such things happen only because there is something wrong in Job's life.

**"His harvest the hungry eat, and he takes it even out of thorns;
and the thirsty pant after his wealth.
For affliction does not come from the dust,
nor does trouble sprout from the ground;
but man is born to trouble
as the sparks fly upward." {Job 5:5-7 RSV}**

"Trouble comes from sin," says Eliphaz. "That's the whole thing Job. If you've got trouble, that has to be the reason."

In the next division, Verses 8-16, he suggests to Job that there is no use playing games with God because God knows too much.

**"As for me, I would seek God,
and to God would I commit my cause;
who does great things and unsearchable,
marvelous things without number:
he gives rain upon the earth
and sends waters upon the fields;
he sets on high those who are lowly,
and those who mourn are lifted to safety.
He frustrates the devices of the crafty,
so that their hands achieve no success.**

He takes the wise in their own craftiness;
and the schemes of the wily are brought to a quick end.
They meet with darkness in the daytime,
and grope at noonday as in the night.
But he saves the fatherless from their mouth,
the needy from the hand of the mighty.
So the poor have hope,
and injustice shuts her mouth." {Job 5:8-16 RSV}

God is in control Eliphaz argues, and he is so clever and so wise that you cannot deceive him. "You can't hide from him Job. He'll trap you, he'll uncover your sin. You might as well get it out in the open!" Eliphaz closes with a section which says in effect "Just give up and God will bless you." Verses 17-27:

"Behold, happy is the man whom God reproves;
therefore despise not the chastening of the Almighty.
For he wounds, but he binds up;
he smites, but his hands heal.
He will deliver you from six troubles;
in seven there shall no evil touch you.
In famine he will redeem you from death,
and in war from the power of the sword.
You shall be hid from the scourge of the tongue,
and shall not fear destruction when it comes.
At destruction and famine you shall laugh,
and shall not fear the beasts of the earth.
For you shall be in league with the stones of the field,
and the beasts of the field shall be at peace with you.
You shall know that your tent is safe,
and you shall inspect your fold and miss nothing.
You shall know also that your descendants shall be many,
and your offspring as the grass of the earth.
You shall come to your grave in ripe old age,
as a shock of grain comes up to the threshing floor in its season.
Lo, this we have searched out; it is true.
Hear, and know it for your good." {Job 5:17-27 RSV}

Eliphaz argues that if you just cast yourself on God's mercy he will forgive you and restore you and everything will be fine. You can be confident that you will be protected and kept, even to a ripe old age. Now of course the truth is, that is not what happens. Anyone who has lived a few years at all knows that you can find godly people who are not protected, and who still go through times of trial and peril and suffering. Though this sounds like good theology it does not take in all the facts. That is why Job is given to us, that we might learn to correct our theology, and to understand that there are deeper reasons for suffering than just sin -- the argument of Eliphaz here.

We will just take Job's reply to this chapters six and seven. It is divided into two sections. In chapter six Job rebukes his friends, speaking to all three of them. (Probably there were others present listening to all this, a silent audience, except for a certain young man who comes in at the end of the book.) And in chapter seven Job addresses his complaint to God. There are three parts to each chapter. First, Job says he has a right to complain.

Then Job answered:

"O that my vexation were weighed,
and all my calamity laid in the balances!
For then it would be heavier than the sand of the sea;
therefore my words have been rash." {Job 6:2-3 RSV}

He admits he has been speaking very strongly but he says, "If you were where I am, you'd understand. My sorrow is so terrible it gives me a good reason to complain."

**"For the arrows of the Almighty are in me;
my spirit drinks their poison;
the terrors of God are arrayed against me.
Does the wild ass bray when he has grass,
or the ox low over his fodder?
Can that which is tasteless be eaten without salt,
or is there any taste in the slime of the purslane?
My appetite refuses to touch them;
they are as food that is loathsome to me." {Job 6:4-7 RSV}**

"You never hear an animal complain " Job says, "when he is well fed and taken care of. That's why I am complaining. You cannot take that which is tasteless and loathsome without trying to improve it with salt, or something. So I have a right to complain. It helps me to bear my troubles." Many people talk that way. I know a lot of people who feel that if God sends them tribulation they have a right to tribulate! And most of them do. Job felt that way: "What I am going through is so bad I have to complain!" Then he speaks of his inability to bear more, Verse 8:

**"O that I might have my request,
and that God would grant my desire;
that it would please God to crush me,
that he would let loose his hand and cut me off!
This would be my consolation;
I would even exult in pain unsparing;
for I have not denied the words of the Holy One.
What is my strength, that I should wait?
And what is my end, that I should be patient?
Is my strength the strength of stones,
or is my flesh bronze?
In truth I have no help in me,
and any resource is driven from me." {Job 6:8-13}**

"I have no strength to handle this. What does God think I am made of, stone or bronze, that he subjects me to all this?" Have you ever felt that way? Have you ever said, "Lord, you promised that you would not tempt me above that which I'm able to bear and Lord we went by that point weeks ago!" But God knows us better than we know ourselves. He knows how much we can take. He knew how much Job could take, and he has a reason for all this. So Job's cry goes unanswered. Then Job turns to his friends and rebukes them expressing his irritation at their misunderstanding (verses 14-21):

**"He who withholds kindness from a friend
forsakes the fear of the Almighty.
My brethren are treacherous as a torrent-bed,
as freshets that pass away,
which are dark with ice,
and where the snow hides itself.
In time of heat they disappear;
when it is hot, they vanish from their place.
The caravans turn aside from their course;
they go up into the waste, and perish.
The caravans of Tema look,
the travelers of Sheba hope.
They are disappointed because they were confident;
they come thither and are confounded.
Such you have now become to me," {Job 6:14-21a RSV}**

Job says, "You friends are like a mountain brook that is full of water in the wintertime when nobody needs it. But when the hot summer sun comes out, and you long for the refreshing of the water, it is nothing but a dry, gravel-filled stream bed. Even the caravans of camels looking for water for refreshment find nothing there. You said you came to comfort me, and all you've given me is trouble. You rebuke me." Job is obviously

irritated at these friends.

**"Have I said, 'Make me a gift'?
Or, 'From your wealth offer a bribe for me'?
Or, 'Deliver me from the adversary's hand'?
Or, 'Ransom me from the hand of oppressors?'" {Job 6:22-23 RSV}**

'Did I ask you to help me? I didn't send for you. You came to comfort me and instead you rebuke me. I didn't ask for it!'

**"Teach me, and I will be silent;
make me understand how I have erred.
How forceful are honest words!
But what does reproof from you reprove?
Do you think that you can reprove words,
when the speech of a despairing man is wind?
You would even cast lots over the fatherless,
and bargain over your friend. [You'd even beat your grandmother!]
But now, be pleased to look at me;
for I will not lie to your face.
Turn, I pray, let no wrong be done.
Turn now, my vindication is at stake.
Is there any wrong on my tongue?
Cannot my taste discern calamity?" {Job 6:24-30 RSV}**

Job is simply saying, "If there is something wrong then tell me, for I don't know what it is." His dilemma is that he knows God is doing this to him, but he cannot find a reason. He knows there is nothing in his life that he has not already confessed and dealt with. He is not claiming to be sinless; he is saying that he has handled whatever sin he has been aware of, so what else is there? Why is this going on?

Then he turns to God, and complains about the hardness of his present experience. Chapter 7:

**"Has not man a hard service upon earth,
and are not his days like the days of a hireling?
Like a slave who longs for the shadow,
and like a hireling who looks for his wages,
so I am allotted months of emptiness,
and nights of misery are apportioned to me.
When I lie down I say, 'When shall I arise?'
But the night is long,
and I am full of tossing till the dawn.
My flesh is clothed with worms and dirt;
my skin hardens, then breaks out afresh.
My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle,
and come to their end without hope." {Job 7:1-6 RSV}**

We get concerned when we get a pimple on our face, but Job was covered with boils! Then he complains about the hopelessness of the future, Verse 7:

**"Remember that my life is a breath;
my eye will never again see good.
The eye of him who sees me will behold me no more;
when thy eyes are upon me, I shall be gone.
As the cloud fades and vanishes,
so he who goes down to Sheol does not come up;
he returns no more to his house,
nor does his place know him any more." {Job 7:7-10 RSV}**

He has given up. He thinks he will never see any relief that he will go on like this to the end. And out of that

meaningless suffering and hopeless darkness he cries out in honest despair, Verses 11-21:

**"Therefore I will not restrain my mouth;
I will speak in the anguish of my spirit;
I will complain in the bitterness of my soul.
Am I the sea, or a sea monster,
that thou settest a guard over me?
When I say, 'My bed will comfort me,
my couch will ease my complaint,'
then thou dost scare me with dreams
and terrify me with visions,
so that I would choose strangling
and death rather than my bones.
I loathe my life; I would not live for ever.
Let me alone, for my days are a breath.
What is man, that thou dost make so much of him,
and that thou dost set thy mind upon him,
dost visit him every morning,
and test him every moment?
How long wilt thou not look away from me,
nor let me alone till I swallow my spittle?
If I sin, what do I do to thee, thou watcher of men?
Why hast thou made me thy mark?
Why have I become a burden to thee?
Why dost thou not pardon my transgression
and take away my iniquity?
For now I shall lie in the earth;
thou wilt seek me, but I shall not be." {Job 7:11-21 RSV}**

Have you ever felt that way? "Lord, leave me alone, I've had enough! Why are you so intent on making life miserable for me? Why don't you just let me go?" So Job cries out in baffled bewilderment. Now, even at this point in the book, there are some things that we must constantly remember. One is, we know something about this scene that Job does not know. We see some purpose in this that he has not yet seen what is also true about the sufferings we go through. In every time of trial there are two purposes in view: Satan has his purpose, and God has his.

Satan's purpose here was to use the pain of Job's illness to afflict his body; to use the priggish, well-intentioned comfort of his friends to irritate his soul; and to use the silence of God to assault his spirit and to break his faith. But God's purpose is to teach Job some truths that he never knew before, to deepen his theology, and help him understand God much better. God's truth was to answer Satan in the eyes of all the principalities and powers of the whole universe, and to prove him wrong in his philosophy of life. God's purpose was also to provide a demonstration for all the sufferers in all the ages that would follow that God knows what he is doing. As the book of Job unfolds, we will see how this is gradually brought to light.

What an encouragement to those of us who must go through some times of suffering, to understand that it is not always because we are sinful. Sometimes it is, and we will know it when it is. But if, like Job, you know of nothing you have done that you have not dealt with, and still the suffering goes on, look behind the curtain of God's purposes and you will see that great and eternal events are hanging upon the outcome of the struggle.

Prayer:

Our Father, thank you for the sufferings of Job. What marvelous lessons they teach us about our own lives and our own sufferings. Help us to view them in the light of the revelation of this book, and to know that we know more truth than Job knew, and we have far less reason to give up than he did. Grant to us, Lord, strength to stand in the midst of pressure, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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