

THE NEW BEGINNING

by Ray C. Stedman

We last saw our friend Job flat on his face before God. He had been shown two unforgettable aspects of God's glory and character. You recall how God took him on a trip through the world of nature and showed him his creative power and wisdom, not in mysteries beyond men's ken, but in the simple things all around him. God asked him questions, but he could not answer. Neither can we, with our advanced science today. By means of this, God showed Job that he was entirely out of his league in trying to question God's ways and God's wisdom. What God did was so far beyond what man can even remotely dream, there is no comparison at all, and no possibility of challenge.

Then God took Job on a tour of the moral problems of the universe. Using the symbolism of two great beasts, Leviathan and Behemoth, God showed him the depth of evil in humanity, what the New Testament calls "the mystery of lawlessness," and why it is that every generation has to struggle with the same problems. We make no moral advance from century to century, but wrestle with the same difficulties that people wrestled with thousands of years ago, even at the dawn of history. There is some deep embodiment of evil in the human heart that God shows to Job through the symbolism of these two ferocious, unconquerable beasts. As Job learns that these are the problems in his own heart, problems that God has to deal with, he bows before him. Before this breathtaking vision of God's power and might and glory and wisdom, Job repents in dust and ashes and cries out to God.

Now, in Chapter 42, beginning with Verse 7, we come to a new beginning, and this is a very appropriate section for this New Year's Sunday. Job has learned his lesson now. He saw that there were depths and degrees of pride and self-sufficiency in himself that he was not aware of. Surely there is nothing more difficult for us to learn than the fact that there are things in us that we are not conscious of. We think we are doing well. Our own view of ourselves is rather superficial, and we think everything is right. It is a shocking revelation to us to learn that what we thought to be love was really nothing but self-centeredness, playing the game by which we get something back in return. What we thought to be righteous behavior was really nothing but a manipulation of someone else.

This is what Job has learned. He thought he could trust God through any circumstance of life. He was confident in his own ability to serve God, like Peter saying to Jesus, "Everyone else will deny you but I will never do so. You can count on me." So in a sense Job, quite honestly and earnestly from his heart, had been saying to God, "I'll stay with you no matter what." For a while he held in there, but now God has shown him that without divine help he is totally weak, thoroughly undependable. Job has seen his guilt and admitted it before God, and has repented.

Now it is the three friends' turn, and in Chapter 42, beginning with Verse 7, Jehovah summons Eliphaz, the leader of the three, before him. These friends dropped out of sight for a while when Elihu came on the scene, but now God calls them before him, Verse 7:

After the Lord had spoken these words to Job, the Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite: "My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. Now therefore take seven bulls and seven rams, and go to my servant Job, and offer up for yourselves a burnt offering; and my servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has." {Job 42:7 RSV}

That sentence from God must have had a stunning effect upon Eliphaz and his two friends, for the one thing they had been sure of all through this account was that they were defending the righteousness of God. They were zealous for God's honor, and they must have prided themselves on the fact that they were standing for

God's righteousness. They were upholding his sovereignty among men, they were scathing in their denunciation of human pride and evil and now, to their startled amazement, they are charged by God himself with defaming him. That must have been a hard blow to their pride.

This chapter seems to us to be filled with surprises. One of the surprising things to these men was the discovery that all their vaunted concern and zeal for the honor of God was regarded as worthless in his sight. They are charged with defaming the name of God.

Well, what is it that they said that God took such offense to? You recall that they formulated a theory of suffering that made God out to be nothing but an arbitrator of justice, a great cosmic judge who visited punishment upon those who did wrong, without exception and instantly, and he rewarded those who did right with prosperity and blessing. This was the kind of God they set before people, a great judge of all men, but not at all concerned with compassion, love, mercy, and patience. Thus the God they set before men was a God far from reality. They did indeed distort the Being of God.

Now I find a lot of Christians like this. The God they picture before people is one who is wholly concerned with truth, as though that is all there were; who is deeply offended by sin -- and he is -- but who instantly visits it with some kind of condemnation and judgment. They picture God as a very stern and harsh Being who is leaning over the battlements of heaven, ready to cry "Cut that out!" the minute anybody steps out of line. That is why the world gets very distorted views of what God is like. That is what these three friends were doing, though they did not mean to. They meant to uphold God's righteousness, but they said nothing about his mercy, his compassion, his patience, his willingness to reach out and wait for men and give them opportunity to repent.

The Bible says that God sends the rain upon the just and the unjust alike. God's blessings are not withheld from those who are wrong and who are rebellious. He gives them family life. He gives them joy, times of pleasure, and times of peace. As Romans puts it, it is the goodness of God that is designed to lead to repentance, that men may understand where their blessings are coming from. That is why we in the West have been put through a school time recently as to who runs the weather. Some of us thought it was the Weather Bureau. Now we know better.

We know they cannot do a thing. It is God who sends rain, who, as Job so beautifully puts it, "tilts the wineskins in the heavens," and lets the rain drop upon us. God allows these things to come in order that we might understand the basis of human blessing and repent of our wickedness and our rebellion and turn back to him. This is what these friends have failed to set before men. They set forth a distorted God.

Then, as you look back through the book, remember they charged Job with hypocrisy, and even with outright wickedness, without any basis in fact whatsoever. This man, who morally was perfect and upright in his conduct -- even God himself said so -- they charged with being a hypocrite and with hiding some deep and terrible sin in his heart. All his troubles came from the fact that he was unwilling to admit some awful thing that he had done, they said, and they increased the torment of this poor man's suffering by these false accusations. In doing so, they represented themselves as the mouthpiece of God; they were speaking as though God himself was charging Job with this. Now God takes offense at that. They were doing the devil's work. The devil is the accuser of the brethren; is the accuser in heaven and the destroyer on earth. These men, unwittingly, find themselves victims of the devil's lies, and they have become his instruments to torment Job. So God calls them to account. He says that his wrath is kindled against them because they have been guilty of these things.

Perhaps we are also surprised that twice in this account God says that Job said what was right about him. We have never seen any recognition up to this time that Job had said things right. In fact, the whole book is aimed at pointing out that Job was wrong in his attitude about God. Although both the friends and Job say some wonderfully true things about God, and there are great passages of brilliance and glory that depict something of the power and beauty and wisdom of God, nevertheless, Job himself had admitted now that he spoke in ignorance and folly, and he repents of this and puts his hand upon his mouth. So it is rather surprising that God twice admits that Job has said that which is right about him.

In what way did he say what was right?

First, I think, if you look back through this you will see that when Job could see no sin in himself he did indeed charge God with unfairness, but the moment God showed him the sin that was still deeply embedded in his heart he immediately repents. There is no hesitation, there is no argument, there is no self-defense. He admits immediately that the problem was in him and not in God.

Second, remember that Job was always true to the facts as he saw them. Now he did not see them very clearly, and there are things about himself and about God's rule in the universe that he did not understand, but to the point where he did see things, he was always honest. There was no distorting or twisting of the facts to fit an inadequate theology. He did not try to kid himself, and he did not try to admit to things that could not see were true. He was always brutally honest and forthright.

Third, as you remember the account, he took his problem to God, even though God was his problem. That is an admirable thing in Job. You remember how all through the account he is breaking into prayer constantly. Out of the torment and anguish that he feels, he always ends up laying his complaint before God. Now the friends never pray for Job. They never ask God to relieve his suffering; they never ask for help or wisdom or understanding on their part. They simply ignore all contact with the living God themselves, but Job is forever crying out before God and bringing his problems, his bewilderment and his bafflement unto the Lord himself and asking for wisdom and help. Remember how Jesus said to the people in his day, "Come unto me all ye that are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

Finally, when Job does repent, he declares without restraint and without reservation that God is God, that he is holy and wise and just and good, even when he seems to be different. Ultimately, that is the highest expression of faith -- that we do not trust our human observations of what is happening. We understand the limitations to our humanity and we do not assume that we have all the facts by which we can condemn and judge a holy God. That is what Job does. He pronounces God as just and holy in all that he does.

Now, however, to the credit of these three friends, they too immediately obey God when he tells them what is wrong. Look at Verse 9,

So Eliphaz the Temanite and Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamanite went and did what the Lord had told them; and the Lord accepted Job's prayer. {Job 42:9 RSV}

There is no resistance on their part either, no argument, even though it means they have to go with their hat in their hand to Job and ask him to pray for them. Can you imagine how humiliating that must have been, after all the proud things they had said against him, and how they had put him down and scorned him? Now they have to come and say, "Job, old friend. we're sorry for all we said. God has asked us to ask you to pray for us. But they do this. They bring the offering of seven bulls and seven rams. Now, seven is the number of perfection in Scripture. and the bull is always the picture of service. perfect service, even unto death. That is the meaning of the offering of seven bulls. The ram in the Bible is the picture of energy. and seven rams offered is the total commitment of their energies unto God, even unto death. In this burnt offering they are picturing the true basis of their acceptance before God -- not their own service for him, but that which is represented by that great and all-sufficient substitute for man's wrongdoing. Jesus himself.

All these offerings of the Old Testament picture Christ. They are the way the Old Testament saints looked to the work of Christ, just as we do in looking back to the cross. These offerings were a picture of the cross of Christ. As these men offered these bulls and rams, it was a way of indicating that they understood that before God, man's honor is laid low and even his best efforts are shown to be folly. They turn from all this to that perfect substitute for man, the righteousness of Christ, and accept what God gives in man's place.

All of us get angry with God because he has rejected our service. our efforts on his behalf. I would hardly dare ask you to raise your hands, those of you who have felt angry and upset with God because he did not, apparently, recognize all the good things you had done for him this last year. That is the way we feel. But the thing he labors to show us is that none of that can ever stand in his presence. The New Testament tells us that "No flesh shall glory in his presence." We must rest only on that sacrifice made on our behalf, the

righteousness of Christ himself.

Now, notice also God's insistence on intercessory prayer here. What an interesting thing this is. God tells these friends, "There will be no pardon for you without Job's petition on your behalf. If you want to be received and forgiven you must not only bring the sacrifices, but my servant Job must pray for you." What an instructive lesson this is on what prayer is. Many of us, I think, grow up with the idea that prayer is a kind of a way that has been given to us to manipulate God to do what we want, a kind of heavenly Aladdin's lamp that we can rub, sometimes for a half-hour at a time, and feel God is going to suddenly appear as the genie and bow and say, "Master, what do you want me to do for you?"

But prayer is not that. Prayer is not the way we get God to do what we want. Prayer is the way by which God enlists us in what he is doing. This is what is underscored in this passage, and it is so important that God says that without prayer he will not do it! Remember it is James in the New Testament who reminds us of Job. James tells us, "You have not because you ask not." How impoverished our lives are, and the lives of our friends and loved ones, simply because we think prayer is unimportant and we do not bother to pray for one another. God underlines this here: "Your friends will not be accepted, Job, unless you pray for them." When Job prayed, they were indeed forgiven and pardoned.

Now, what a beautiful picture of forgiveness here! I love to picture this scene in my imagination. Here is Job's chance, if he ever wanted it, to get even with these friends. When God sent them to him with their hat in their hand asking for pardon and asking for his prayers, how easy it would have been for him to have said, "Aha! I thought you'd come around, you stinkers you! You were the ones who gave me all that trouble. You ran me down, you falsely accused me, you said all those evil things about me, and now I've got you where I want you. I'll let you sweat a little bit. I'm going to get even with you!" That is what many of us would have said, but it is obvious that Job does not do that.

I wish we could have heard his prayer. I am sure it would have been something like this: "O Lord, here are these three friends of mine. They've been stubborn, hard-headed, foolish, ignorant men, just as I was, Lord. You forgave me, and now I ask you to forgive them as well." What a beautiful spirit of forgiveness is exercised here. Job might have said, "I called them miserable comforters, and that's what they were. I suggested that they were so proud and cocky that they were the people, and wisdom would die with them. But Lord, I was just as proud and just as ignorant. You forgave me, and so, Lord, I ask you to forgive them as well." It says that the Lord heard Job's prayer and accepted it, and the friends were forgiven.

Doesn't that remind you of Paul's words in Ephesians 5, when he wrote to the Christians and said, "Be ye kind, tenderhearted, one to another, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you." I do not think there is anything more contrary to a Christian's spirit than an unforgiving heart, a grudge against someone else, Christians refusing to talk to someone, or being cold and frosty in their relationships with each other. Nothing is more removed from the spirit of Christian forgiveness than that. What a beautiful thing, to see Job praying for his friends without a vestige of resentment or an attempt to get even on his part, but holding them up before God, and God honoring that prayer, forgiving these men and restoring them to his grace, withholding his punishment, and blessing their lives.

Now, in the next section, Verses 10-13, we get a picture of the restoration that God brought into Job's life:

And the Lord restored the fortunes of Job, when he had prayed for his friends; and the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before. Then came to him all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before, and ate bread with him in his house, and they showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the Lord had brought upon him; and each of them gave him a piece of money and a ring of gold. And the Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning; and he had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand she-asses. He also had seven sons and three daughters. {Job 42:10-13 RSV}

This is what James calls "the end of the Lord," or, in the Revised Version, "the purpose of the Lord" {Jas 5:11}, revealing him to be compassionate and merciful. Now, God did not suddenly become compassionate

and merciful to Job; he has been that way all along. God's character, unchanging, is compassion and mercy. He is love. This is what we must remember. Though he puts us through times of trials and pressures and hardships as he did Job, it is not because he is angry and upset, it is because he is compassionate and merciful. If we wait, he will bring us to the place where we will see that as plainly and clearly as Job did. So the end of the Lord, the purpose of the Lord, is to reveal his own heart of compassion and mercy to this dear old man.

There is a beautiful passage in Jeremiah's Lamentations that I think we must always remember when we are going through trials and afflictions. I would urge you to memorize it as you face 1978. It is a great passage for a new year.

**For the Lord will not
cast off forever,
but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion
according to the abundance of his steadfast love,
for he does not willingly afflict
or grieve the sons of men. {Lam 3:31-33 RSV}**

Isn't that encouraging? He does not willingly afflict or grieve the sons of men. He will do it because he loves us and we need it, but he does not do it lightly. He feels with us in it. As a good parent with his children, he hurts worse than we do at times. He does not willingly do it. "Though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love." I think we need to recall that when we are put through times of pressure and danger.

Now God moves Job's relatives and friends to bring him gifts of silver and gold. (I commented already on this last week in our Christmas meditation, which, by the way, is not intended to be a part of this series on Job -- it was a meditation. The exposition of the passage is what I am attempting this morning.) But perhaps these gifts of silver and gold that these friends and relatives brought were God's way of providing a foundation of the wealth that he is to bring Job. At any rate, as the text tells us, Job ended up with double everything that he had before. He started out with seven thousand sheep, and ended up with fourteen thousand. He had three thousand camels, and now he has six. He started out with five hundred yoke of oxen and now he has a thousand. He once had five hundred she-asses, but that is doubled now to one thousand. "Well," you say, "God doubled everything but his sons and daughters. He ended up with seven sons and three daughters, just like he had at the beginning." No. You forget he has seven sons and three daughters in heaven, and seven sons and three daughters more on earth, so God indeed gave Job double everything that he had to start with. That is the mercy of God. He does not willingly afflict or grieve the sons of men, but longs to give them blessing when they come to the place where they can handle the blessing that he wants to give.

Now, there is another surprise here, in Verse 14. The focus of the chapter now comes upon the daughters of Job:

And he called the name of the first Jemimah; and the name of the second Keziah; and the name of the third Keren-happuch. And in all the land there were no women so fair as Job's daughters; and their father gave them inheritance among their brothers. {Job 42:14-15 RSV}

Last night I was talking with a lady who is expecting a baby, and I asked her if she had picked any names yet. She said she had been working on some names for girls and boys. If any of you are looking for some girls names, here are some excellent suggestions: Jemimah (that is always connected with molasses); Keziah (that sounds like Kizzie in Alex Haley's book, Roots), and Keren-happuch. We will look at these significant names in a moment. The fascinating thing about this account is that the whole Scripture seems to focus now on the daughters of Job instead of the sons. In chapter one it was the sons who were in the forefront. They had a birthday party every year and they invited their sisters to come and share with them. But here at the end of the book it is the daughters of Job. Now, being the father of four beautiful daughters myself, I know how Job must have felt about them. (It would have been a mistake to ask Job about his children, because you would have had to wait as he drew out all the pictures and gone through them all with you!) He was proud of these daughters. In fact, he gave them an inheritance among their brothers, which was absolutely unheard of in the culture of that day.

If women's lib were wanting a text from Scripture, I would think this would be an excellent one, for the whole point of the passage is that these daughters were made to share alike in the inheritance that they were given. I believe that that is symbolic, for the story of this book is the story of a man who, as far as he knew himself, wanted to serve God, was upright and morally strong, and did his very best to do what God wanted, but was unconscious of the level of evil that was in his heart and life. On those terms he was living what we would call today the "natural life," the life of those around. The best of men at times will live moral, clean, upright lives. Job was like that. I believe he was a true believer; I am not implying that he was not. But he was living as though he had not yet discovered truth about God that would take him to that deeper level of life called the "spiritual life." By the end of the book he has learned not to trust himself for anything at all. By the end of the book he has learned that he cannot, in his own strength, do anything acceptable before God. By the end of the book he has come to the place where he has cast everything upon the grace of God and is taking his righteous standing before God totally from God's gift to him. He is taking his stand in the great mediator of whom he himself has spoken throughout this book. On those terms, as the New Testament tells us, if any man be in Christ there is neither male nor female, but all share alike in the glory of God and in the inheritance that is ours in Jesus Christ our Lord. Spiritually, there are no distinctions. That is what is brought out so beautifully at the end of this book.

Now, I have suggested that the names are significant, and here are the meanings of them. Jemimah means "dove." As you know, throughout the Scriptures, and even in our culture today, the dove is the symbol of peace. Keziah is another spelling of the word "cassia," and, you recall, when the wise men brought their gifts to the infant Jesus, they brought gifts of cassia, aloes, and myrrh, all of which were fragrances, incenses, expensive, rare, beautiful. Cassia, therefore, is an incense, or a fragrance. That is the symbolism of it. Keren-happuch literally means "the horn of adornment," and is a reference, therefore, to the outward beauty that comes from an inward character. What you have here then is peace, fragrance, and beauty as the fruits of Job's trials. Surely, as the text says, there were none so fair in all the land as these. The New Testament, in Romans 5, tells us that suffering does this to those who learn to take it as the evidence of God's love. "Suffering," Paul says, "produces patience, and patience produces character, beauty, fragrance, peace." "And character produces hope, hope that you are realizing the kind of person you want to be, and hope does not make us ashamed," Paul says {cf, Rom 5:3-5}. It leaves us confident and sure of our God and of the power and resources of the spiritual life. That is what we have here at the close of this book. We are focused in on this in order to teach us what came out of Job's trial.

Now the book ends on a note of contentment and peace:

And after this Job lived a hundred and forty years, and saw his sons, and his sons' sons, four generations. And Job died, an old man, and full of days. {Job 42:16-17 RSV}

He was probably about seventy when the book opens, so he is a good old man, even older than me! What a picture of peace, a contented man. God had greatly blessed him.

Now, as we come to the beginning of 1978, before us stretches a new year, a new beginning. The old is past, put away for ever. God invites us always to forget about all the distrust and all the fears, all the anxieties of the past, all the resentments we have been holding against others, all the grudges, all the criticisms -- to put them away and begin again. The question that is over us as we close this book (and I feel it deeply in my own heart), is, "On what basis am I going to live 1978. Will it be on the old basis of it-all-depends-on-me, do-it-yourself goodness before God, trying my best to be pleasing to God and meaning it with all my heart but never realizing the depths of evil with which I have to deal?" Or will it be accepting the gift of God which is waiting for me every day, fresh from his hand, a gift of forgiveness, of righteousness already mine, of a relationship in which he is my dear father and I am his cherished, beloved son, and that I have, therefore, provided to me all I need, all day long, to say "no" to evil and "yes" to truth and right? Will it be on that basis? If it is, 1978 will be a year in which my life will be characterized by peace, fragrance, and beauty. And so will yours. Or, if we insist on living it on the same old basis, we will find ourselves like these friends of Job, arousing the anger and the wrath of God. Though he is patient and merciful, our only escape will be to repent of our evil and rest upon the righteousness of our perfect substitute, and return to God for the blessing that he is waiting to give. That is the choice before us, every one of us. How are we going to live 1978?

Prayer:

Our hearts reflect these words, Lord Jesus. We sense the beauty of your life, the glory of your character. We know that it is your purpose to reproduce that in us, that we shall be like you. We thank you for what you are doing to bring it about. We thank you for the pressure, the pain, the trials, the disappointments, the afflictions that come upon us, Lord, by which you produce your likeness in us. Forgive us for our rebellion, for our complaints, for our murmuring against you. Help us to accept your tender mercies, Lord, and to see behind it your loving, compassionate heart, and out of it to bring praise, to the glory of our great God. We pray in your name, Amen.

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