

LESSONS FROM JOB

by Ray C. Stedman

The book of Job is far too complex and far too profound to do a "once over lightly" treatment, so I would like to go back this morning and recall to us the great truths that it has brought before us. This is probably the very first book of the Bible that was ever written; it takes us back to the earliest days of man's redemptive history. Job was probably a contemporary of Abraham. He did not live in the Promised Land; he lived in another country of which we know very little, the ancient land of Uz. Yet his faith reflects that heritage of revelation which had passed down to men and was widely scattered throughout the earth. It had come through the stories that men had told each other, beginning with Adam and Eve, and through their children; passed on down to the days of the Flood, and then carried on beyond that by the sons of Noah. So we have a very early faith represented in the book of Job. Yet, as we have seen in going through it, it is in line exactly with the greater revelation of Scripture which we come to in the Old and New Testaments.

There is a tremendous setting forth of great and marvelous truth in this amazing book. It does what every book of the Bible does to some degree: it strips away the illusions of life and permits us to see life as it really is. Now, in my judgment, there is nothing more valuable about Scripture than that, for we do not live very long without learning, often to our chagrin, that life is not what it really seems to be, that things that we think to be reality and truth turn out to be illusions -- delusions if you like. We are surrounded by widely accepted philosophies and ideas that are not true. Men are exhorted to live on the basis of ideas that are false, and we have to learn that. It is very hard for us to do so.

It is very difficult to believe that what we think we see happening is not really what is happening. That is why we struggle so with believing the Bible because it is a book that corrects these false conclusions that our senses often bring us to, and challenges the phony thinking of the world around us. That is why it is so important to come together and let the Spirit of God take the Word of God and set us straight, to correct our thinking and renew our minds, as Paul says in Romans 12. So I would like to go back through the book of Job and pick up the great truths that it sets before us. This book is so complicated in its presentation that sometimes we have gotten lost and have missed or forgotten the truth that came before us earlier.

The first surprise that hit us in Job was in Chapter 1 where we were suddenly taken behind the scenes of this world and shown what goes on when a believer is being tried or tempted. Now, we are all tried and tempted, we are all presented with alluring invitations to get involved with deadly and destructive things, or we are pressured to lose our tempers, or lose our faith, and act in a different way than the Word of God says we should. We always see those temptations as coming to us from a combination of adverse circumstances, or perverse people, or both. We see that our trouble is that things are not working out the way we planned. If God would only straighten out these things and make them work according to our expectations, everything would be fine. Or if he would just get rid of some of these troublesome people around us!

But here in the book of Job we see that that is not the whole story. What is really happening is that we have suddenly become the point in God's line of scrimmage (if I may use a football analogy), through which the devil and his angels have decided to try to run the ball. All the pressure of that well-trained, powerful team of evil is directed at us, and we discover that we are the focus of his attack. That is what went on with Job, and that is what goes on in our life as well. We find we are no longer sitting safely on the bench, watching the game and enjoying it. Suddenly, we find ourselves thrust right out in the middle of it. And the most important thing is that we forget that is what is happening. We see it only in terms of what is visible to us.

In reading the book of Job we must never forget what we are introduced to in the first chapter. In facing the problems of our own lives, we must never forget that this book reveals what is happening to us in the midst of the troubles and temptations and pressures that we are being subjected to. That is why we must never forget that life is not a Sunday School picnic. The world around thinks it is, or that it ought to be, that somehow we deserve to have a good time and enjoy ourselves, that that is what we are here for. Now nothing is further

from the Christian position. We are not here to have a good time. God gives us good times, but every one of them comes as a gift of his love and grace; they are never something we deserve. We are not here to try to enjoy ourselves, to amass as many comforts we can, and retire to a happy life. We are here to fight a battle against the powers of darkness. We are here to be engaged in an unending combat with powerful forces that are seeking to control human history. We have been called into the battle. We must never forget that. That is why the Christian cannot plan his life, plan his retirement, like a worldly man can. We are living different lives. This is no picnic.

The older I grow the more I learn to see this present, earthly life of mine as I thought once of my time of service in the U.S. Navy during World War II. I looked forward to the ending of that time of service. I enjoyed it, it was an exciting time, but I looked forward to the end of it. Though I wanted to do well during that time, it was only a temporary period, and the real life would begin when I got out. We can think of our present life very much as a boy might who goes away to college. He is there to learn something, to get ready for something, not to enjoy himself. Now you can have a lot of fun in college; that is not wrong. But no one goes to school for that purpose -- or at least they should not. College is not for spending money and having fun; college is for learning something. And so is life. That is why God has taught us what is going on behind the scenes right here at the beginning of the book of Job. That is reality.

Then this is all connected to that line of truth the book reveals about the nature of human evil. What is humanity like in its basic character? As we have gone through this book, we have seen how these friends speak to Job about various wicked people and almost always they speak in terms of murderers, thieves, rapists, fornicators, cruel tyrants, unjust, wretched people. These are the wicked, as these friends see them, but as we pursue the book and the argument of it, it becomes clear that these things that they point out as wickedness are really only the fruit of something deeper in human nature. They are coming from a deep-seated root of pride in fallen humanity, pride that expresses itself as independence, self-sufficiency, "I've got what it takes, I can run my own life, I don't need help from anybody."

We are determined to always have our own way and to manipulate things so that we get what we want. That is the root. Jesus said it: "Out of the heart of man proceed murders and adulteries and fornication and hostility and anger," {cf, Matt 15:19, Mark 7:21}. All the evil things of life come from the root of pride. What we learned in this book is that that pride, in its terrible, vicious character, is equally expressed not only in terms of murder, thievery and robbery, but also it can come out, as we have seen in the three friends and even in Job himself, as bigotry and pompousness, as self-righteous legalism, as critical, judgmental attitudes and condemnation of others, as harsh, sarcastic words and vengeful, vindictive actions against someone else. That is wickedness, just as much. So we learn that human evil is not something confined to the criminals of the land. It is present in every heart, without exception, and it takes various forms. We are only deceiving ourselves when we say that their form is wrong and ours is right. Pride is the root of all sin, and it can express itself in these various ways.

Now, coupled with this is what the book teaches us about the nature of faith. Job thought he was exercising faith when he obeyed God and did what was right when it was clearly to his best interest to do so. We find that many people think like that today. They think they are exercising great faith when they believe that God is there, that they are living their lives day by day with the recognition that God is watching and is present in their affairs, and they are doing the right thing because they know that if they do not, they will get into trouble. They call this living the Christian life, this is exercising faith. It is a form of exercising faith, I grant you that. It is believing, at least, in the invisible presence of God. But it is a weak faith. Those who live according to that are serving God only when it is in their best interest to do so.

This was the accusation that Satan hurled at God when Job was discussed before him. Satan said, "Job serves you only because you take care of him. If you remove your hand of blessing from him, he'll curse you to your face," {cf, Job 1:11}. Many people are living like this. They are really only serving God as long as he blesses them. The moment the blessing ceases, or difficulty or trial comes, they want to quit serving him. Every week I get evidence of this. Every week some report comes to me of how someone has gotten into some difficulty or some trouble has come, and they have turned their back on what they had professed about their Christian faith and thrown it all over and were living for themselves and for the world. It is weak faith that only serves God when he blesses. We learn from this book that great faith, the kind that makes the world sit up and take notice,

is revealed only when we serve God when it is difficult to do so, when serving him is the hardest thing we can do. That is what we have here in the book of Job.

Remember the picture the New Testament gives us of the sufferer of Gethsemane who faced that hour in the garden with the recognition that he was afraid of what was coming. He confessed to his own disciples that his heart was exceedingly sorrowful within him, even unto death, and he asked three of them to pray for him and uphold him through a time of deep and terrible pressure upon him. Yet, in that hour of anguish, though he prayed, "Father, if it be thy will, let this cup pass from me," reflecting his true humanity, how he shrank from the hour of anguish and pain, nevertheless, by faith, he added the words, "not my will but thine be done," {Matt 26:39}. Now that is great faith. That is what you finally see exhibited here in Job himself. Though he trembles, though he falters, though he fails, the last thing he does is cling in helplessness to God and asks him to do something to explain his perplexity. That is why Job becomes an example of faith. Great faith is being exercised probably when you feel like you are being the least faithful, when you are being so weak that you cannot do anything but cling. In that moment, heaven is looking over and wondering at the greatness of faith. That is what this book teaches us.

All this adds up to the true view, then, of the nature of fallen man. Man appears at his best in the person of Job. When this book opens, you have a very beautiful picture of a highly respected and greatly honored man, a sincere, moral, devoted, selfless, godly man who spends his time in deeds of good and help to many people, obviously intent upon doing what God wants. Therefore, we would call him a deserving man, infinitely deserving of God's blessing, because he so faithfully served and followed him. There are many people like that in the world who are not even Christian who live on those terms. They are, in a sense, godly people in that they recognize that there is a God and try to follow him. They are devoted and selfless people, and that is fallen man at his very best. But what this book is designed to do is strip away all the outward appearances from that and show us Job as he really is. He finally came to see himself as he really was, a self-deceived man. He imagined he had resources in himself to handle life and problems, resources that he really did not have. This is one of the tremendous lessons of this book. We too imagine that we have power to stand and be true to what we believe, like boastful, blustering Peter, who said to the Lord Jesus, "I will never deny you. I will lay down my life for you," {John 13:37}. And he meant every word of it. Yet, when the hour of temptation struck, he found himself as weak as putty, and so do we until we come to realize, as Job did, that he had no resources to stand in himself, that God had to hold him, or he would never be held. Out of his weakness came his strength.

This book shows us that Job discovered he was a lover of status and prestige. When God took away his position in the community, he began to hearken back to it and to think longingly of those days when he had a position of high honor and dignity, when he could walk out into the community and people bowed before him and respected him. Job discovered that he liked that. It was what made him keep on serving God, because he had that kind of honor and prestige accorded to him. When all that disappeared, he found himself querulous and angry and upset because he had been denied what he thought was his right. What this book teaches us is that our hearts, more than we understand, long to share the glory of God. We really do not want to serve God unless we get some glory for ourselves out of it. That is often the reason why we do things -- because we are motivated by a desire for status and prestige in the eyes of others. All this is stripped away from Job.

As you read this book you discover that God seems to come across as someone somewhat smaller than Job himself does, that Job's self-vindication and self-justification makes God look less than he is. That is the terrible evil of that attitude. It robs God of his glory. Remember, in Paul's word in 1 Corinthians he says, "No flesh shall glory in God's presence." This is what we find in our own lives very frequently. How this book reveals this to us!

The great theme of the book -- and the one for which it is world famous -- is its treatment of the reason for suffering in the Christian life. None of us struggles when we are told that suffering is sent by God to punish wrongdoers. We have a long list of names that we could present to God of people who deserve this kind of thing. It is eminently just for God to punish wrongdoers with suffering, we think. People who hurt others and are vicious, cruel and wicked ought to be made to suffer for what they do. Our whole system of justice is built upon that principle. That is why we put people in jail and fine them, because we are trying to carry out justice through punishing wrongdoing. That satisfies our sense of justice, except when we happen to be the wrongdoers getting punished. Then, of course, it is all very unfair.

We can even handle what the Bible teaches about suffering, that it is sent to awaken us when we are tending to go astray. Even though we are saints, suffering is sometimes sent to wake us up and get our attention, and we can handle that, too. We have all had experience of it when we were drifting away and thought everything was going fine. We are tooling along and doing OK, we think, when suddenly some catastrophe strikes, some terrible trouble comes. At first we resent it and complain bitterly and ask why should this happen. But it keeps on, and finally we begin to listen to what God is saying. When we listen we see things that are wrong. Now this is happening in Job; we understand that.

But that is not all that the book of Job teaches us about suffering. There is something far greater than that. This book teaches us something that should have been obvious to us from our reading of the Gospels, and that is the fact that Jesus suffered. Now, obviously, Jesus did not suffer because he was a wrongdoer, nor did he suffer because he needed to have his attention captured by God. He was always sensitively responsive to the Father's will, and always did that which was pleasing in his sight. Yet his life was filled with suffering from beginning to end -- rejection, misunderstanding, disappointment, cruelty, harsh words and unjust treatment -- all the way through, so that he merited the description of the Old Testament, even before the cross, that he was "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief," {Isa 53:3}.

Why did he suffer? He suffered because suffering, in a Christian, is a way of allowing God to demonstrate that Satan is a liar and a cheat. That is what is going on in the book of Job. Satan had made proclamation before all the universe that men served God only because God blesses them, and that if you remove the blessing, men would curse God to his face; that man does not see any intrinsic value in God himself, but it is only his own self-interest that makes him serve God. Now, far too often believers have confirmed that lie of Satan. But here in the case of Job, and, as frequently happens in our own experience, suffering is sent to prove that Satan is wrong, that God will be served even when he does not bless any longer, because he is God, and he is worthy of the praise and the honor and service of men. That is why Jesus suffered. He suffered as a demonstration to all mankind that God was still God and was worthy of service no matter what happened.

That is why death meant nothing to the Lord. He despised the cross, we are told, "Having his eye fastened on the joy which was beyond, he despised the cross" {cf, Heb 12:2}, and went on to become the great sufferer of Calvary. Job teaches us that suffering is a means by which evil is answered, and God vindicated. Therefore, it is a high and holy and glorious privilege that is granted to some Christians, more than others, to uphold the glory of God in the midst of the accusations of the devil in this world. I hope we will learn to see suffering in that way. Sometimes we deserve it. Sometimes it comes because of our misdeeds. It comes to awaken us. But sometimes it is granted to us because it is a high and holy privilege we have of doing what Paul calls "sharing the sufferings of Christ, filling up that which is lacking in the sufferings of Christ, for his body's sake, which is the church," {cf, Col 1:24}.

Some years ago I was introduced to a woman who had just lost her husband and her son in an auto accident. Her heart was broken; she was devastated by this double loss that had suddenly come into her life. When I went to see her she was weeping, torn-up, hardly even able to speak because she was so overcome by her grief. Somebody had asked me to try to comfort her but I wondered what to say to her. Looking to God in prayer, I laid my hand on her shoulder and said, "You have been given a very high and holy honor." Glancing up through her tears, she said to me, "What do you mean?" I sat down with her and went through some of the Scriptures, pointing out to her that we are given the privilege of suffering for Christ. Paul puts it that way in Philippians. "It has been given on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his name's sake," {cf, Phil 1:29}. I pointed out to her that God had given her the privilege of bearing difficulty and trial, given her an opportunity to demonstrate that his strength and his love and his grace will continue, despite all the outward circumstances, even the worst of things that life can throw at us. As we talked together, a new look came on her face. She said to me, "I see what you mean." We prayed together and I left her. Later, I heard that her life was such a radiant testimony throughout all that time of struggle that hundreds of people were touched and saw their own sufferings in a different light as a result.

I once had to go see a Christian couple who had just had a Mongoloid baby. I said something very similar to them. I said, "God has called you into very high privilege in giving you this. You're being given a chance to

demonstrate something that very few other Christians are asked to bear. If you will see it in that light, what a difference it will make." That couple did take it that way, and their dealings with that child as he has grown have been a constant testimony to scores and scores of people of the goodness and the greatness of God.

Now, this is what you get out of Job. Job is teaching us, by means of the symbolism of these two great beasts, Behemoth and Leviathan, how God handles evil. What God is saying to Job is, "Look, you've had a part in this with me. Your suffering, your unexplained torment, the physical affliction that you've been going through, have been the means by which I have been able to lay hold of these two ferocious powers to control them, regulate them, and keep them in bounds in the world. You have been the instrument of it." Job, therefore, was given a view of the tremendous glory of bearing suffering for the Lord's sake.

Then, of course, the greatest theme of all in this book of Job, and the one that I hope we will remember more than anything else, is that it reveals to us the character of God himself. God often appears to us as a cold, impersonal Being, distant from us, uncaring, even ruthless and vindictive, demanding many things from us; a powerful Being, but without compassion. I am sure if you conducted a poll you would find that that is the most common view of God in the world today. Almost everyone out on the street, if he thinks of him at all, thinks of God as being a rather cold and distant Being, who is powerful and just, hard and demanding, an angry God. That is the common view of what is usually called the "Old Testament God," as though God were two kinds of Beings, one in the Old Testament and one in the New. But what this book shows is that behind that appearance (and even Job saw him that way for a while), God is always exactly what he is, not ruthless and cold, but actually deeply aware of our problems. He is deeply concerned about us, carefully controlling everything that touches us, limiting the power of Satan and allowing certain expressions, according to his knowledge of how much we can bear. He is patient, forgiving, and ultimately responsible for everything that happens.

In the beginning of this book you have God and Satan and Job. By the end of the book, Satan has faded into the background, completely disappeared. All you have left is God standing before Job, with his arms akimbo, saying to him, "All right, Job, I'm responsible. Any questions?" When Job begins to see what God is working out in his vast, cosmic purposes, and what he is making possible by means of the sufferings of Job, he has no questions to ask whatsoever. The final view of God in this book is of a Being of incredible wisdom who puts things together far beyond the dreams and imaginations of man; who is working out incredible purposes of infinite delight and joy that he will give to us if we wait for his purposes to be worked out fully.

This book mentions a time when "the sons of God shouted with joy" {Job 38:7}, at the creation of the world. But other Scriptures tell us about a time that is coming when the sons of God will be revealed. Paul calls it "the manifestation of the sons of God" {Rom 8:19 KJV}, when all creation will shout in a greater glory than was ever hailed at creation, in the new creation, the new thing that God has brought into being by means of the sufferings, the trials, and the tribulations of this present scene. That is why Scripture speaks in numerous passages about "this slight momentary affliction preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" {2 Cor 4:17 RSV}, and of how the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that will be revealed in us. When that day breaks, the one thing for which we will be infinitely thankful, the one thing above all others that will thrill us and cheer us and cause us to glory, is the fact that out of all the created universe we were chosen to be the ones who bore the name of God in the hour of danger and affliction, problem and trial. There is no higher honor than that. That is what Jesus means when he says, "Blessed are you when men persecute you and say all manner of evil against you falsely for my name's sake. Rejoice and be exceeding glad, for great is your honor before the Father. For so persecuted they the prophets who were before you," {cf, Matt 5:11-12 RSV}.

Now, the sufferings of Christ involve more than just reproach for his name's sake. They involve illness, affliction, accident, the so-called handicaps with which people are born -- all this becomes part of sharing the sufferings of Christ if we take them as a privilege, and not as a reproach. If we view life as God sees it, seeing this as only a temporary time when we have a great opportunity to bear honor for Christ that we will never have again, never again in all our eternity of time will we ever have the privilege of bearing suffering for his name's sake in a day of reproach. So, as we are called to that, I hope and pray that this book of Job will help us to understand the realities of life, the greatness of the privilege that has been accorded to us, and the richness of glory God heaps upon us when he allows us to suffer for his name's sake.

Prayer:

Our Father, words fail us to express what we feel in our hearts. We do count it indeed a mighty privilege to bear reproach for your name's sake. We know that the day is coming when that will be our chief joy, that will be the treasure that we have laid up in heaven. We hope, Lord, that it will be a rich treasure indeed, that we will stop our complaining and stop our grieving and stop our griping about what you send, and count it a great joy and privilege to bear suffering and reproach for your name's sake, sharing the sufferings of Christ, that we may also share in the glory which is to follow. We ask in his name, Amen.

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