

Care Group Leaders Meeting ~ January 10, 2017 ~ Covenant Life Church  
**Job—Toward a Theology of Suffering**

The Book of Job deals with the timeless question of suffering, in particular, the apparently undeserved suffering of faithful believers. Job's sufferings are so extreme as to be out of all proportion to life's general pattern of sowing and reaping. Job's friends have a one-size-fits-all approach to the question of suffering and try to press Job into their shortsighted theology.

### Synopsis

After a brief introduction that informs us of Job's wealth, community stature, righteousness and piety, we get a view of the heavenly council when the "... sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them." (Job 1.6)

God's commendation of Job provokes a challenge from Satan. [The word *satan* as used here is not a proper name but a common noun meaning *adversary*—the term for accuser or prosecutor.] He argues that Job's piety is merely the result of God's blessing—it is *not* sincere. He proposes a test, "... touch all that he has and he will curse you to your face." (Job 1.11) God agrees to the test but imposes a limitation on Satan, Job himself must not be touched.

And so all that Job has is destroyed. But he passes the test with flying colors. "In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong." (Job 1.22) A second round follows with the same pattern. This time Job's health is broken but his life is protected. Job continues to maintain his integrity though his wife's counsel (similar to Satan) is to curse God and die. (Job 2.9) "In all this Job did not sin with his lips." (Job 2.10) All that occurred in the heavenly council is unknown to Job.

After this prose prologue, the bulk of the book continues in poetic form with several speeches given by Job and his friends. This mainly consists of Job's friends trying to justify God by criticizing Job while Job steadfastly maintains his innocence. Job demands a hearing with God and is surprised and overwhelmed when it is granted. God speaks to him in the final (prose) part of the book but doesn't address why Job has so suffered.

## Thoughts on Job and Suffering

- A. There *is* such a thing as innocent suffering. “Once and for all, these opening scenes make it clear that suffering does not necessarily imply any guilt in the victim nor any failure in his precautions or his faith.”<sup>1</sup> Some suffering is not directly linked to any sin. Indirectly, as a result of the fall, yes. But the point is that the relationship between suffering and retribution is never so precisely rigid as to rule out the kind of suffering we see in Job. There is no necessary one-to-one correspondence. In general, we reap what we sow. This is the state of affairs that we see in Proverbs. But there are exceptions, perhaps many.
- B. There is an enemy. Satan has come to steal, kill and destroy. He is the accuser of the brethren. (John 10.10; Revelation 12.9-10)
- C. “It would be a mistake to see [God’s] concession to the accuser as a merely isolated tactic. It reflects a consistent practice of God. Where we might argue that omnipotence ought to have stamped out evil at its first appearance, God’s chosen way is not to crush it out of hand, but to wrestle with it; and to do so in weakness rather than in strength, through men more often than through miracles and through costly permissions rather than through flat refusals. Putting the matter in our own terms, we might say that He is resolved to overcome it in fair combat, not by veto but by hard-won victory.”<sup>2</sup>
- D. God is sovereign over all. There is no dualism here. Satan’s power is real but limited by God. We know from James 1 that God is not evil, cannot be tempted with evil, and tempts no one. Satan has limitations placed on him, as Peter found out. “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail.” (Luke 22.31)
- E. But this means that suffering falls within the realm of God’s sovereignty.

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<sup>1</sup> Derek Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes*, IVP, 1985, p. 57.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 59

- The open theist attempts to rescue God from the charge that He is responsible for suffering by denying God’s omnipotence and omniscience.
  - Prosperity theology’s key verse in Job: “For the thing which I greatly feared is come upon me, and that which I was afraid of is come unto me.” (Job 3.25 KJV) In this line of thinking, Job’s fear opened the door to Satan’s attack. Thus, Job is really responsible for his suffering. Therefore the lesson of Job is that we must resist the temptation to fear by fighting the fight of faith. But Chapters 1 and 2 deny this interpretation, as does the dialogue that follows.
- F. It’s true, there *are* chastening benefits to suffering. “Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word.” (Psalm 119.67) But this side steps Job’s dilemma.

The main thing in adversity is to know that we are laid low by the hand of God and that this is the way He takes to prove our allegiance, to arouse us from our torpidity (lethargy), to crucify our old man, to purge us from our filthiness, to bring us into submission and subjection to God, and to excite us to meditate on the heavenly life.  
John Calvin on Psalm 118

- G. The problem with Job’s comforters is not that they were hypocrites or heretics or fools. They started out very well. But their “... basic error is that they overestimate their grasp of truth, misapply the truth they know, and close their minds to any facts that contradict what they assume.”<sup>3</sup> In doing so they misrepresent God and misjudge Job.
- H. Job’s error—because you are innocent/blameless, that does not mean God is unjust. *There are other factors unknown to us.* God is infinite, we are not.
- I. God did not blame Job for venting. The psalms of lament also demonstrate this. And God knows the difference between rebellious complaining and struggling faith. Such honesty in the throes of suffering is commendable.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 61.

- J. But there is a danger here. God did rebuke Job for “darkening counsel by words without knowledge.” (Job 38.2) The desire to know “Why is this happening?” can lead to the assumption that God is obligated to explain Himself.
- But Scripture nowhere promises that God must explain Himself or that we are entitled to understand His actions. The desire to understand is itself understandable, but must not be allowed to morph into an idolatrous demand.
  - Part of the problem stems from misreading the nature of our relationship with God. Though it is a real personal relationship, it neither is nor can be the relationship of two equals—two persons on the same level. God is infinitely above us and must condescend to relate to us. His infinity which is expressed in the attribute of holiness means more than His *moral* superiority. There is also an infinite distance between us on the level of *being*. He is of an entirely different nature from us.
  - In the realm of wisdom, knowledge and understanding, this infinity is called omniscience. When God finally did speak to Job, it was not to answer his demand for an explanation, but to subject Job to a barrage of rhetorical questions. These demonstrated His creative power and might and at the same time exposed Job’s utter weakness.
  - But this is not meant to leave us fearful. Though He is infinitely above us, He is also near to us in gentleness (Isaiah 42.3; 57.15) so that in humility of heart we may draw near Him in our suffering.
- K. Developing a theology of suffering in advance can mitigate our struggles to some degree but will not entirely remove the shock to our system.
- L. “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.” (Deuteronomy 29.29) Apparently, God believes that what He has revealed to us in Scripture is sufficient for our journey. And He does promise that one day we will know even as we are fully known. But that day is not yet here. So we must all trust Him for His grace.