

JOB 2: THE LAMENT OF JOB AND HIS 3 "FRIENDS"

Innocent Suffering and a God of Love - this is a question that perplexes many people. Has done over centuries and is still a major stumbling block today for non-Christians. They ask, "How can there be a God of love, and yet there is so much suffering in the world?" This is a complex question, that cannot be answered glibly, and indeed in the book of Job we find this intense discussion going on.

The Book of Job, which is part of the Wisdom Literature of the Bible - is an incredible book! The story of Job, the man of God and an amazing picture of a faith that endures -riches to rags, and then rags to riches. The man who fears and trusts God in the midst of intolerable suffering;

One of the central questions and themes of the book is the debate between Traditional Wisdom v True Wisdom. Traditional Wisdom of the day was called the "Doctrine of Retribution" which means you are suffering because you have sinned. In the first two chapters we see the heavenly councils between God and an accuser Satan, and God allows Satan to attack Job - all Job's possessions, livestock and most catastrophically his beloved children are wiped out!

So after all the calamities that befall Job he was joined for 7 days by his 3 friends. There is silent mourning for 7 days and the silence is broken by a wisdom lament. In this we hear Job's absolute sense of despair, and in this lament we hear many questions surfacing:

- Why was he born?**
- Why did he survive birth?**

Job finally voices his complaint, his lament and the debate begins. What was Job thinking after all, what were his friends thinking? What his friends thought Job would say and yet never did? That is why we get the rest of the story, if Job had said "OK, I have sinned, you my friends were right all along, I deserve all I got - Lets go home!" End of the story! But NO, instead Job curses the day of his birth. In context, it is an event of significance in the Ancient Near East, not only to survive birth, but to survive the first year. A child's birthday is a very big celebration!

Job longs for death, and the fact he survived birth and infancy to experience this - troubles him! Satan wants Job to curse God, and even his wife tempts him too, and Job opens his mouth and curses, but not directly God, but the day of his birth. Job as we enter his lament gives voice to his struggles, to his emotional turmoil, to his physical pain. His misery was all over and deep within his soul.

Job was experiencing, the loss of his family, the loss of his possessions and extreme physical suffering. As we join Job in this, we can't really judge him, can we, for wishing to be dead. Job's grief placed him at a crossroads of his life, a crossroads of his faith, shattering many misconceptions that some people have of God. That God will make you rich, that God will always protect you from trouble and pain, and that God will always protect your loved ones. (See Philippians 2: 5 - 11 for what God asked his One and only begotten son to do)

Job was driven back to the basics of his faith in God. He had two clear choices:

- Curse God and give up**
- Or, he could trust God and draw strength from Him to journey on.**

I have seen different people, choose both of the options above in response to difficult circumstances and suffering! As we shall reflect on later on though, there is an even deeper pain for Job.

What is intended here by the author in relating this element is to picture Job in the depths of despair in order to set the stage for the friends counsel and Job's response to them - these are called the "Speech cycles" A friend offers their wisdom and Job responds.

So Job's 3 friends enter the scene, and well - speak! Which for Job was shall we say, not the best thing to happen in the circumstances!!

Read Job 4: 7 - 9, 12 - 16, and 5: 17 to find out what Eliphaz says.

So eloquent was Eliphaz, so right sounding, that one could easily affirm it, and yet in fact it was so far removed from truth and genuine sympathy! Here we begin the pattern that soon becomes very familiar, the pattern of oblique accusation with the ultimate

presupposition - THAT JOB IS SUFFERING BECAUSE HE HAS SINNED!

1. In Chapter 4: 7 Eliphaz says, *“Remember, who being innocent has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed.”* What Eliphaz was saying was that **“The innocent don’t suffer, therefore draw your own conclusions - TO BE SUFFERING THIS BADLY JOB; YOU MUST HAVE SINNED BADLY”** Now what needs to be said at this point; is that part of what Eliphaz said is true, and part is false.

It is true that those who promote sin and trouble eventually will be punished. However, it is false to say that anyone who is good and innocent will never suffer. All the material recorded and quoted in the Bible is there by God’s choice in 2 Timothy 3: 16 it says; *“All scripture is God breathed, and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”* Some though is an example of what people said and did, but is not an example to follow. The sins, the defeats, the evil thoughts and deeds are all recorded in God’s divinely inspired word, but we should not follow these wrong examples because they are in the Bible - they need to be seen in their context. The Bible, God’s Holy inspired word gives us guidance about what we should do as well as what we should not do.

2. Then secondly Eliphaz then backs up his argument in v. 12 - 16 with a claim of special revelation; *“A word was secretly brought to me..a form stood before me and I heard a hushed voice”* A hushed voice - I wonder?? What Eliphaz was saying to Job was **“You see Job - This is not my wisdom but this is truth from God!”**

Eliphaz thinks it was God, but we know it couldn’t have been. Why? Because in Chapter 1: 1 it says, *“A man whose name was Job. This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil.”* Eliphaz even says **“I could not tell what it was “** but even then **HE PRONOUNCES THE JUDGEMENT OF GOD UPON JOB**, what does Jesus say in Matthew 7: 1, *“Do not judge others, or you too will be judged.”* We will see later on in the story, it is Eliphaz , not Job, who is criticised by God for misrepresenting him.

3. Then thirdly, Eliphaz in Chapter 5: 17 presents the “generous” suggestion that Job’s suffering is in fact nothing more than divine discipline, designed to bring back the “wayward” Job. It is so simple for Job’s friends; simply confess his wrong doing in order to reinstate his previous relationship with God. Now again, biblically, there is a lot of evidence of people like David and others, confessing, repenting of their real sin, being forgiven and turning away, but this story is very different.

That was Job’s first friend - he still had two more to go!! In chapter 18 : 1 - 21 we find Bildad, and we don’t have time to study him in depth, but suffice to say, Job suffered more of the same from him. He says “Job - you must be so wicked to have suffered this much. It is because you won’t admit you have sinned, so you are still suffering. It is the wicked who suffer so draw your own conclusions. Then Zophar Job’s third friend appears, and he even goes further and says “Job’s sin deserves even more suffering than he’s experienced” Now I have to say at this point, for Job with “friends” like this - he didn’t need any enemies!

In Chapter 11: 13 - 15, Zophar says *“If you put away the sin that is in your hand and allow no evil to dwell in your tent, then you will lift your face without shame.”* Job responds in 13: 15, *“Though he slay me yet I will hope in him, I will surely defend my ways to His face.”* Zophar is a real know it all, he criticises Job for his brand of wisdom and also appears to be offended by Job’s lament. The argument about whose wisdom is the right wisdom continues, and is at the centre of the whole book.

Zophar then took the same position as Eliphaz (Ch 4 - 5) and Bildad (Ch 18): **JOB WAS SUFFERING BECAUSE OF SIN.** However, Zophar’s speech was by far and away the most arrogant, he was a complete know it all; he lacked any humility; he was totally insensitive to Job’s unique situation. He even called him false (11: 11). We can do nothing without God knowing about it - of course God will notice our sins - but the ironic thing about that is that Job already knew this! Why? Because we read in Chapter 1 : 5, *“Early in the morning he would sacrifice a burnt offering for each of them. Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts.”* Job

knew that God knew his and his children's hearts and made practical ritual sacrifice before God.

Job answers all 3 of his friends in a similar way as in Chapter 12: 7 - 9. His friends were not saying anything he didn't already know. Job continued to maintain that his friends had completely misunderstood the reason for his suffering. Job did not know the reason either, but he was certain that his friends reasons were both narrow- minded and incorrect.

The function of the speech cycles where Job's friends offer their "wisdom" and Job responds are there to present the debate, "Where is God when it hurts?" Is there such a thing as innocent suffering? If so, why does it happen? What is the place within the divine order? It shows the "Traditional Wisdom" position of his 3 friends and another wisdom presented by Job. These debates are meant to make the reader, us, you and me today to STOP, AND REFLECT WITH OUR GOD - to think deeply about the issue of suffering.

We are also meant to see that the 3 friends have got it wrong!

- IN THEOLOGY**
- IN ATTITUDE**
- IN LACKING HUMILITY**
- IN SENSITIVITY**
- IN BEING SO ARROGANT AS TO PUT "GOD IN A BOX".**

They are so wrong in their assessment of Job, and by following this through logically, wrong in their approach to WISDOM as well. In particular we are to see the arrogance of the friends as their big mistake, even if their original intentions were good! Their desire is to provide a defence of God and justice. However, in doing this, they clearly imply that they know how God works - and he cannot work outside the framework of their own understanding - they put the God of the universe in their small box!

Have we ever done this?

The stupidity of such an attitude by Job's friends is that Yahweh is working in precisely a way they do not understand. We know this as readers of the whole, the whole picture, but unfortunately

for Job and his friends they don't have access to this and never will!

So briefly, how might Job's lament and the input from Job's 3 friends relate to us today?

- 1) In Job's lament, the seven days of silence and anguish have brought him to re-evaluate how he views the world; and his current one has been shattered! *"Why is the light given?"* When there is no meaning, we can see it is the misery of "meaningless" that makes Job preferring to die, instead of living in this intolerable suffering. It appears to Job that God has locked him into "turmoil" as we read in Chapter 3 v. 26:**

"No peace, no quietness. No rest but only turmoil."

Job's inner being is in chaos and his world in confusion. There is suffering all around him, which he can contend with, but without meaning it is almost insufferable. The rest of the book is about him and his friends trying to see the meaning of suffering. This passage the pivot, the hinge on which the story develops. It is the Job questioning God and God's response to Job.

Job though survives the darkest hour since he neither curses God nor takes fate into his own hands by taking his own life. This on-going reluctance to curse God is an indication of grace, love and trust in Job's heart towards God - a key to the story!

We need to therefore ask ourselves, do we have trust and faith in God?

- 2) Trials and grief whether temporary or enduring do not destroy the real purpose of life. Life is not merely given for happiness and personal fulfilment - but for us to serve and honour God! The worth and meaning of life is not based on what we feel, but on the unwavering Grace of Jesus (1 John 4: 10)**

God's love cannot be measured or limited by how great or how little we may suffer as its says in Romans 8: 39, *"Nor anything else in all of creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

3) Finally all 3 Job's friends made the mistake of assuming that Job had committed some great sin that caused his suffering. There were certain they were correct in their "judgement" of him. As we shall see later on in the book, God rebuked them for their pride and arrogance. We too must be careful in the Christian Church, both in leadership and as members not to judge others who are suffering, but instead show the compassion and understanding of Christ. If today's story teaches us something, it is that we must be careful in maintaining the certainty of our own conclusions about how God treats us.

So Job has suffered great calamity, has suffered in silence, he has then voiced his complaint, struggled with the lack of meaning, has not been helped at all by his 3 friends, and next time we will reflect on what Job got right, and also what he gets wrong.

Amen

Gary Torbet

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