

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Lessons from the Lives of Old Testament Characters: Job

Recently I went, with a colleague, to a local hospital to visit a mutual friend with whom we had worked for quite a few years. She had undergone a serious operation but was recovering reasonably well. The long term prognosis suggested she would not be returning to work and in many ways her life would never be the same again. She was the mother of two children and, like many women today, had brought them up, looked after the house and her husband as well as holding down a demanding career. On top of this she had, for many years, attended a church in a very committed way. She had arrived at the time of life when she could begin to take things easy for her children were married which meant she had more time to spend upon herself.

We had been at her bedside for about a half an hour when a porter appeared with a wheelchair to take her for a scan so we had to take our leave. As we walked down the corridor towards the exit my colleague said, "You know, she doesn't deserve this does she?" I think it was in my colleague's mind to say that, as she was a regular church goer, why did God allow her to suffer in such a severe way. I shall ignore the first comment about deserving or not deserving to suffer because illness and disease come to us all regardless of our moral state. I judge that it would be extremely difficult to single out a person who is suffering because they deserve to. The difficult question for the believer is, "Why does God, if He is a God of love, allow so much suffering in this world."

The book of Job, which we are studying this morning, attempts to deal with that very point. It is also worth noting, in passing, that "the patience of Job" is a phrase that is in daily use. As we proceed quickly through the 42 chapters of the book we shall notice how this quality is manifested by Job in the face of great trials and the advice of his friends.

I am not persuaded that the book of Job can be reduced to one succinct statement. Within its pages there seems to be a many pronged approach to the problem of human suffering in a divinely ordered world. The main subject is obviously Job's many afflictions and the problems that this raises in the minds of himself, his friends and his wife. Consequently, the various sections of the book deal with differing suggested answers. These answers, I believe, are as relevant to us today as they were to Job and to the world in which he lived. It might be argued, and I would agree, that there have been tremendous changes in society since Job lived. Nevertheless I would also argue that the circumstances of the lady in hospital, with which I began this talk, raise the same questions that confronted Job and his friends.

Due to the lack of time for a detailed analysis of the whole book, I shall treat our talk this morning as a partial biography of the man Job, trusting that at the same time I will bring to light the important features of the whole book. From chapter 1 we gain some insight as to the character of Job. The first verse of the book says, "There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and shunned evil."

Straight away we notice that he was what we would term a good living man. From the following verses of the first chapter he was obviously wealthy with a large family from whom he derived great comfort. His habits included the worship of God by offering sacrifices. The first chapter also brings before us a challenge as to the reality of Job's offerings to God when he is proffered to Satan as "one that feareth God and shuns evil." Immediately the challenge came back again as to the reality of Job's faith as we can read in verses 9 to 11: "Then Satan answered the LORD, and said, Doth Job fear God for nought? Hast not thou made an hedge about him, and about his house, and about all that he hath on every side? thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his substance is increased in the land. But put forth thine hand now, and touch all that he hath, and he will curse thee to thy face."

A shallow concept of faith can leave us with the idea that if we try to be good then God will never allow anything bad to happen to us. When some calamity does arrive, we immediately begin to blame God and accuse Him of letting nasty things into our circumstances. If we read and understood the early verses of the Book of Job we would never be able to say such things. Believing does not remove us from the crucible of suffering, as Job was to find out.

Before we reach the end of chapter 1, Job has lost virtually all his family, his oxen, sheep, camels and his servants. Even in this desolation Job keeps his faith in the living God as verses 20 to 21 state: "Then Job arose, and rent his mantle, and shaved his head, and fell down upon the ground, and worshipped, And said, Naked came I out of my

mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither; the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD. In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly."

I doubt whether I could be so serene in the face of such calamity. Chapter 2 brings a further onslaught upon Job though this time it is his personal health which is affected. From his feet to his head he is covered with sore boils, or as the New International Version says, "painful sores". Even his wife complains that he retains his integrity. She must have been convinced that his affliction was terminal for her advice to him was to curse God and die. His answer to this is in 2:10 and is worth repeating. "But he said unto her, Thou speakest as one of the foolish women speaketh. What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil? In all this did not Job sin with his lips."

From this we can see that Job did not expect preferential treatment from God. In His sermon on the mount the Lord Jesus states that it is characteristic of God to treat all men impartially. In the latter part of Matthew 5:45, He says, "...for [God] maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust." This is exactly the same sentiment as expressed by Job.

And so we return to the man who was in such extremity of suffering that even his close friends could not recognise him. All they could do initially was to sit alongside and sympathise in silence with him. It might have been better if they had remained in this attitude rather than try, as they did later on, to suggest reasons why he was suffering.

Job's response, after a week of suffering in silence, was to ask three questions which illustrate the depth of his despondency. These are all in chapter 3 and they are,

- Why was I born?
- Why did I not die? and
- Why do I Live?

In these he comes nearer to blaming God than anywhere else in the book. So gloomy was his emotional and physical state that he curses the day of his birth. Life held nothing for him for as we can read in verses 20, 21 and 22: "Wherefore is light given to him that is in misery, and life unto the bitter in soul; which long for death, but it cometh not; and dig for it more than for hid treasures; which rejoice exceedingly, and are glad, when they can find the grave?"

The Bible, in this section of the book of Job, certainly plumbs the depths of human misery. The situation and circumstances Job most feared had befallen him. In his deep despair, he resembles nobody so much as Bunyan's Christian in the Slough of Despond. It should be a source of comfort and help to each one of us that even a man of faith like Job should wrestle honestly with the problems which life brings. Far too often, especially when we counsel others, we are full of platitudes and bromide phrases. Far better to be honest and sincere; to say nothing when there are no easy answers.

This brings us now to the contribution of Job's friends, who are often derogatorily called Job's comforters, because they brought no comfort. Each one of them had a pet theory to place before the suffering Job. Eliphaz is the first to speak and what he says takes the whole of chapters 4 and 5. In this discourse with Job he reveals a more expansive tone than the other two friends, though he seems to consider that, in some way, Job has strayed from the path of righteousness. In 4:7-9 we read, "Remember, I pray thee, who ever perished, being innocent? Or where were the righteous cut off? Even as I have seen, they that plow iniquity, and sow wickedness, reap the same. By the blast of God they perish, and by the breath of his nostrils are they consumed."

According to this, Job's trust in God and his desire to do right should have stood him in good stead. We can see this thought of Eliphaz expanded in 5:15-17, "But he saveth the poor from the sword, from their mouth, and from the hand of the mighty. So the poor hath hope, and iniquity stoppeth her mouth. Behold, happy is the man whom God correcteth: therefore despise not thou the chastening of the Almighty:"

What Eliphaz is saying is perfectly true in another context. Yet it is certainly not the counsel to bring to the suffering Job. No one can know why a person is suffering. We can't, therefore, draw conclusions from that which we don't understand. In the first chapter we were given a privileged view of the background to Job's suffering. From that we can see that none of Eliphaz's remarks ring true in relation to Job.

The following two chapters contain Job's reply to Eliphaz. From the intense agony of his suffering he rails against his friends. In 6:2-3 he uses his pain as an excuse for the heat of his words. "If only my anguish could be weighed and all my misery be placed on the scales! It would surely outweigh the sand of the seas no wonder my words have been impetuous."

And there I am quoting from the New International Version. In the extremity of his suffering Job needed the fellowship and devotion of his friends more than anything. Unfortunately he didn't receive it. Bildad the Shuite is the next friend

to begin to counsel Job. We can read his contribution in chapter 8. If we need further examples of how not to talk to a person who is suffering, we certainly get them from this man. We have seen in 6:14 how Job longed for the feeling sympathy and understanding of his friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. To make it clear I will quote it in full, again from the New International Version, "A despairing man should have the devotion of his friends, even though he forsakes the fear of the Almighty. But my brothers are as undependable as intermittent streams, as the streams that overflow when darkened by thawing ice and swollen with melting snow,"

Job's answer to the unjust remarks of Bildad takes up the whole of chapters 9 and 10. Here we can detect his desire for someone with sufficient strength and influence to take up his cause with God. 9:33 brings before us a thought which expresses all the yearning of Job's heart. "Neither is there any daysman betwixt us, that might lay his hand upon us both."

If I couple this with the translation of the same verse from the New International Version, it will emphasise the meaning more completely. "If only there were someone to arbitrate between us, to lay his hand upon us both."

Here Job is moving into the mystery of divine revelation. The apostle Paul in 1 Timothy chapter 2:5-6 provides the answer to Job's question, "For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; Who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time."

In such statements we are reaching into the awesome demonstration of God's self revelation. Paul touches upon it again in 2 Corinthians 5:19, "To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation."

In such passages, the New Testament makes clear that the daysman so longed for by Job is the Lord Jesus Christ. This is not to say that Job fully understood the great mystery of redeeming love but I do believe that here we have a faint shadow of the massive substance of the Father's seeking and saving love in Christ. An American expositor has well said that the central message of the book of Job is not that of the problem of suffering but the establishing of a right relationship between Job and his God. That thought is well worth pondering over.

Zophar, the third of Job's friends, speaks in chapter 11 and we are treated to yet more condemnation and carping criticism of Job's behaviour. Zophar can't pinpoint any one reason or specific sin yet he rails against Job in a frightful way. For Zophar the fact that Job is suffering in such a dreadful way is evidence of Job's secret sinning. He even claims that Job was not suffering the full measure of punishment that was his due as God had forgotten some of his sins.

We have not time to fully treat Job's answer to these unjust charges. This is contained in chapters 12, 13 and 14. I just wish to high light a couple of points which all those who believe in God have to face sooner or later. In chapter 12 there is the appeal to study the natural world and the totality of men's experience for it is obvious that the entirety of creation is subject to the same truth. God does not use morals or the lack of them as a standard with which to award men a life free from suffering. This is a problem which every one of us must encounter with truth and honesty. Job struggled with this at a level unknown to his three friends. Their superficiality was staggering as they sought to counsel Job in his saloon of suffering. The other thought in this section which I wish to consider is that in 14:13-14 "O that thou wouldest hide me in the grave, that thou wouldest keep me secret, until thy wrath be past, that thou wouldest appoint me a set time, and remember me! If a man die, shall he live again? All the days of my appointed time will I wait, till my change come."

Scholars have argued over whether or not there is a suggestion or hint of the doctrine of the resurrection of the body in the book of Job. For myself I come down on the side of those who think that there is more than a hint. Granted that the book does not contain a full unfolding of this teaching, granted also that much of chapters 12, 13 and 14 contain words that speak of the finality and surety of death, I still claim that within the verses I have just quoted there is the thought that God could hide Job in the grave until an appointed time. This will be touched on again as we consider the later chapters of Job.

We now arrive, in chapter 15, at what is often termed the second cycle of discussions. This is because Eliphaz appears for the second time to bombard his suffering friend with questions and assertions about Job's character and lack of standing before God. He still maintains that the wicked never prosper and that the blameless never suffer. A foolish notion that experience teaches us is false. Perhaps the best answer to the various charges and questions is to quote the words of Job from the beginning of chapter 16: "I have heard many such things: miserable comforters are ye all. Shall vain words have an end? Or what emboldeneth thee that thou answerest? I also could speak as ye do: if your soul was in my soul's stead, I could heap up words against you, and shake my head at you."

I think that that neatly sums up Job's answers to all the accusations and charges which his friends brought against him. The rest of the speeches in this cycle are well worth considering but our time is nearly finished. Before I move to

my final point, I want to mention two brief thoughts from chapter 19. The first is in verse 2 and is but a reiteration of the one I have just quoted from chapter 16. "How long will ye vex my soul, and break me in pieces with words?"

How sad if our counselling is but a repeating of platitudes and well worn phrases. The end of such advice is worse than the beginning. We should never put ourselves in the position of Job's comforters. The second point is in verses 25, 26 and 27, and I quote from the New International Version "I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes - I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me."

Here is the thought of resurrection again. We must be very careful not to make the text say more than it does so I repeat the statement that the book of Job does not give us a full unfolding of the New Testament doctrine of the resurrection of the body. What is here is the conviction that Job would, even if he died, live again to bear testimony to the fact that God was his friend and he was not alienated from God.

I wish now to move to my closing point which, to me, is the most thrilling yet humbling experience that ever Job ever encountered in his whole life. It is contained in the Job 42:1-6. "Then Job answered the LORD, and said, 'I know that thou canst do every thing, and that no thought can be withholden from thee. Who is he that hideth counsel without knowledge? Therefore have I uttered that I understood not; things too wonderful for me, which I knew not. Hear, I beseech thee, and I will speak: I will demand of thee, and declare thou unto me. I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now my eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.'"

This was, in my reckoning, the most wonderful experience in the life of Job. Nothing that his great wealth could buy equalled this. For a person to have the knowledge and experience of God in this life is the greatest privilege granted to us. Fame and fortune can't be compared to the joy of knowing God. The Christian can, or ought to be able to, say with the Apostle Paul that the loss of all things could not be set against the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus the Lord. Job had suffered the loss of all things but eventually, despite the vain repetitions of his friends, he was brought to appreciate the presence of God in such a way that he was keenly aware of his own innate sinfulness. We Christians, also, ought to have that same humility which belongs to those who know something of God's greatness.

May we ever, as we live this life of faith, be those who through God's wondrous grace, have an understanding of His eternal glory and majesty through the revelation of Himself in Christ.

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