

The Exiled Nation (585-535 BCE)

Job and the Problem of Suffering

Readings: *Job 1:1-3:26*

Reflections:

- The book of Job is often dated as one of the oldest writings in the Old Testament. Yet others see it as being written at a later time. Job is portrayed as a patriarch of Israel and is referred to by Ezekiel along with Noah and Daniel. It fits well within this context as the questions of Job fit well within the suffering and failure of Israel during this time.
- The book of Job is unique in that it uses Hebrew words and grammatical constructions that are very rare. This makes some scholars speculate that the book of Job was originally written in another language. Job's name in Hebrew may mean "persecuted" or in Arabic, "one who always returns to God." Both of these meanings would fit the story.
- Job is one of the most difficult poetic stories in the Bible to understand. It focuses on the question, "Why does God allow the righteous to suffer?" It details in length all the typical incorrect responses and yet really doesn't give a clear satisfying answer to the question. The interplay between God and Satan is disturbing. God is portrayed as being willing to allow great disaster and death just to test one person. Satan is viewed as having a kind of working relationship with God that again seems uncharacteristic of the rest of Scripture.
- Job is written in a form that resembles a poetic parable. Although some have tried to argue that this is historic poetry, I think this works against the actual genre content of the story. I think it is safer to read it as a parable similar to Jonah. Was there an actual man Job who was told in folklore as being a righteous man who suffered and this parable used his name to wrestle with the larger question? Or is the entire parable simply a poetic form of wrestling with this question and Job is a fictional character? From the other references in Scripture, it would seem the former is more the case but there is no proof in either case. The part that seems clear though is that this is a parable of extreme proportions to set up the dialogue regarding the suffering of the righteous. To try to use this story to explain how God and Satan relate, or how God tends to act, is to miss the point of the story. This account is a big set up to ask, why does God allow righteous people to suffer? That's it and we need to remain focused on the dialogue related to this one question.

- Job's wealth is described in ideal, symbolic terms. Seven, three and five are words used in Hebrew for perfection and completion. The term "seven sons" was used as a figure of speech for the ideal family. In Ruth it says that she was better than "seven sons." (Ruth 4:15) The use of these numbers in describing his wealth help to reinforce the interpretation that this is a parable and in fact, not an historic account.
- All of Job's actions around sacrificing for the behavior of his children show that he was over the top in his concern about honoring God and keeping Torah.
- The vision of Satan in the general sense of him roaming the earth to war against the righteous aligns with Ephesians 6:10 and following that indicate that the battle of earth is a spiritual battle against evil forces. Also the idea that God can put a hedge around a person for spiritual protection seems to fit with the Biblical narrative as we see witnessed in the book of Acts as Paul is affirmed by God that he will be protected.
- The question is whether Satan has the kind of relationship with God that he can ask God to persecute someone and if God is open to this kind of thing. It makes God morally suspect to think that he would entertain such a dialogue. Most would see that natural disaster and disease are not the direct result of demonic influence but rather the effects of a fallen world. In Ephesians, it would seem that it is more human structures (religion, governments, rulers described as principalities and powers) that are influenced or manipulated by evil forces to bring about evil. Therefore, it would seem on this point for the sake of the parable we are leaving real description of the spiritual world and simply setting up a scenario to discuss the suffering of the righteous.
- What is most fascinating about the interaction between God and Satan in this parable is that it clearly points to a larger story beyond the human story. In the meta-narrative of Scripture, it would seem that God's interaction with humanity is set within a larger drama that involves the spiritual realm. Here in Job we see evidence again that this is indeed the Biblical perspective. The story of God and humanity is revealing the glory of God to the spiritual realm.
- The death and devastation of Job's family is dramatic beyond normal belief. Job's response to such devastation is a clear modeling of the "the righteous will live by faith." (Hab. 2:4). Here is how Job responded to complete devastation: "At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head (a sign of complete humiliation). Then he fell on the ground in worship and said: 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away, may the name of the Lord be praised.' In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing." This is a portrayal of complete, absolute trust in God. Even when all the visuals don't line up, faith means you still trust God's heart and see him as worthy of your love and worship.
- Psalm 73 and Habakkuk is the closest parallel to the book of Job. Where Habakkuk and Psalm 73 focus on the prosperity of the wicked and the apparent suffering or loss of the righteous, Job focuses almost exclusively on the suffering of the righteous. Both are

apparent contradictions to the sense of a loving, just God and so all three writers wrestle with a world where God is real and this apparent inconsistency is real. In all three writings we see three common threats of insight. First, living by faith means trusting God when things go bad and this is in fact the essence of living in true righteousness. It is not adhering to an ethical code or a religious ritual that makes a person righteous. It is only living in a daily trust relationship with God that transcends the immediate circumstances. Second, the only place of refuge in the midst of suffering is God himself. He meets us in our suffering. Third, the true divine perspective is an eternal one. Short-term it would appear that God is not righteous. Long-term though it becomes clear that God's will and purposes will be done. Job experiences his restoration in this life. Yet, for many others, it will be in eternity when those that suffer will be rewarded.

- As the story continues we see again that Job has the melodrama and grandeur of a parable. The sequence is repeated a second time and now his wife gets into the game and calls Job to curse God and die. The writer makes it clear that Job is a disease-infested zombie who is physically, emotionally, relationally, and materially suffering to the greatest degree possible. This is simply the worst imaginable scenario.
- Job then has three friends come to sit with him. These friends are portrayed as the best, most loyal friends a man could have. They simply sit with him in silence for seven days and nights (a symbol of completeness). This is a beautiful picture of what true friends do. They give the gift of their presence. They take the time just to be with the person in need. One of the greatest aspects of suffering is isolation. These three friends come and simply remain faithful to Job even though his wife has abandoned him and called on him to curse God and die. In the story of the parable, it would seem that his wife has responded with anger and unbelief in response to the devastation of the family.
- Job expresses in his first poem what almost everyone who suffers feels. "I wish I was never born." Non-existence is a welcome relief to those who suffer. Death is viewed as a great place of relief and release. "Why is life given to a man whose way is hidden (no understanding of the meaning or purpose of life), whom God has hedged in? (no escape from a terrible situation)...What I feared has come upon me; what I dreaded has happened to me. I have no peace, no quietness; I have no rest, but only turmoil." Anyone who has suffered can fully resonate with these words.
- As we launch into this discussion, we must remember that the book of Job, as with the entire narrative of Israel, is an incomplete story that is given to us to understand fully what doesn't work to change the human heart. This story will help us see what doesn't work and what isn't true. Only in Jesus will we discover the answers and find a satisfying response to the question this parable raises.
- Does this mean there is no value in reading this story? No, there is value. It is important for us to clearly work through what doesn't work and what isn't true because our

intuition always leads us towards a way of thinking and approach to life that simply doesn't align with God. Job helps us to see in ourselves how quick we are to judge other people who suffer and how often we misunderstand the truth about walking through difficult times.

- This story also helps prepare us for the suffering of Jesus. We see in Job human suffering that has apparently little point and no answer other than to trust God, he is sovereign. We will see in Jesus human suffering that is used for complete redemption and restored relationship. May God help us again learn what doesn't work and what isn't true so that we can more fully see, experience and embrace the truth we find in Jesus.