

Suffering and the Fear of the Lord

Wisdom from the book of Job

Rabbi Harold Kushner had a son with a rare genetic disorder (progeria) that causes a child to age prematurely and rapidly. His son basically died of old age when he was only 14. Based on his own experience and on his reflection on Scripture, Kushner wrote the book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* in 1981. He wrote the book to help people navigate their experience of tragedy and suffering.

In his book Kushner makes extensive reference to the book of Job. Strangely, Kushner's conclusion from the book of Job that ***God is compassionate, but he is weak***. He said that God is just as frustrated and heartbroken as we are by our suffering, but he lacks the power to intervene. [In response to Kushner's view of God, Elie Wiesel, the holocaust survivor, made the comment, "If that's who God is, why doesn't he resign and let someone more competent take his place?"]

Kushner's conclusion that "God is compassionate but weak" illustrates how tempting it is for us to impose our own reasoning on the Scriptures, especially the book of Job. As we'll see, the book of Job teaches anything BUT the idea that God is weak and unable to intervene.

Instead of imposing our own reasoning on the book of Job, we should come to this book humbly and let it speak for itself. We need to notice which questions it answers and which questions it leaves unanswered (and there are many unanswered questions in Job). I'm going to argue that the book of Job is first and foremost about ***fearing God in the midst of suffering***, especially innocent suffering.

I suspect that virtually every one of us here today either is suffering something tragic or is close to someone who is suffering something tragic. I know for a fact that many of you are suffering in deep and painful ways. Perhaps like Kushner, you feel helpless and you wonder, "Where is God? Does he even care what's happening to me? If so, why hasn't he rescued me?"

Today as I give an overview of the book of Job, I invite you to bring your suffering, especially your innocent suffering, before the Lord. The book of Job doesn't answer every question we have about suffering, but it does show us what it means to fear God and to become wise in the midst of our suffering. If we become wise, that will be enough.

An Overview of the Book of Job.

Prologue: Job, a prosperous man who feared the Lord, suffers catastrophic loss.

(Job 1-2)

Job is introduced in 1:1 this way:

1 There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job, and that man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.

That is the classic description of a wise man in the book of Proverbs (see Proverbs 8:13). We are told in the very first verse of Job that he was a wise, God-fearing man. We are next told that Job is also prosperous in every way. He has ten children, hundreds and hundreds of livestock, and many servants. Job was experiencing the blessing that was promised to those who fear the Lord in Proverbs. For example, Proverbs 22:4 reads:

4 The reward for humility and fear of the Lord
is riches and honor and life.

That's what Job was experiencing. Like most parents, Job cared about his kids more than anything else. And the worst thing that his kids could do was "curse God in their hearts." So after his ten children had gathered for a feast, Job would offer sacrifices to God on their behalf just in case they had "sinned and cursed God in their hearts."

Verses 6 through 12 in Job 1 describe one of the most interesting scenes in all of Scripture. The Lord (the God of Israel) has convened a gathering of his inner circle of angels (sometimes called the divine council). In the Bible angels are intelligent, spiritual beings (as opposed to humans who were created embodied, angels were created without bodies). The angels in God's inner circle are called "the sons of God" indicating that they constitute his heavenly family.

As the sons of God presented themselves before him, another angel, an adversary or accuser (the meaning of satan), shows up. Satan has been roaming around on the earth. God asks him this (verse 8):

8 And the Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?"

Out of everyone on the planet, God pointed to Job as his best example of someone who feared him and walked in wisdom. Satan's response is that the Job feared God because God had bought him off, that anybody would be loyal if they had the prosperity of Job. Take away Job's prosperity and he won't fear you; he will curse you to your face.

Surprisingly (to us anyway), the Lord gives Satan permission to do whatever he wanted to Job as long as he didn't touch Job's body. Satan devastated Job's wealth and Job's family. On a single day Job four messengers showed up at Job's house. The first three told him that all of his livestock had either been stolen or killed, along with his servants. The last messenger told Job that while his ten children were feasting in the oldest brother's house, a great wind blew and caused the house to collapse. None of the children survived.

Job's response (1:20-21):

20 Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. 21 And he said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

That is the response of a person who truly fears the Lord; when he experienced catastrophic loss he **related** to God as he really is. There was no gap between his theology and how he related to God. Since God had given him everything he had (wealth, servants, children), he believed that God had a right to take away everything he had. Instead of cursing God to his face, he fell to the ground and worshiped God. The author pronounces this verdict in verse 22:

22 In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.

Satan lost the wager in chapter 1. But in chapter 2 Satan comes before God again. When God points out that Job hadn't cursed him to his face, Satan then challenged, "Take away that one stipulation; afflict his body and then he will curse you to your face." Again God agreed to the wager. And so Satan afflicted Job with sores from head to toe. And Job sat down in a heap of ashes and scraped his sores with a piece of broken pottery.

At this point Job's wife - who had also experienced the loss of her children and her wealth - enters the scene.

9 Then his wife said to him, "Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die."

For Job's wife, God had crossed a line. He was unworthy of Job's integrity and worship. When she says, "**Curse God** and die," she is unknowingly urging Job to do what Satan said he would do. We can understand her anguish of sorrow, but saying that is brutal.

Well, when you're wise you recognize foolishness when you hear it.

10 But he said to her, "You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

For Job, the idea of cursing God was just plain foolish. The author again pronounces that Job "did not sin with his lips." Therefore Satan had lost his second wager with God. We don't hear from him again in the book of Job.

At the end of chapter 2 we read that three of Job's friends (Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar) came to "show him sympathy and comfort him" (2:11). They wept with him, mourned, and sat in silence with him for 7 days. I don't know about you, but I've never devoted a week of my life to go weep and sit in silence with a friend who's suffering. But these three men did. They showed up for Job. Their compassion was real.

If Job had cursed God, that would be the end of the story. God would have lost the wager and Satan would have been right about Job. But because Job DID fear the Lord, he responded with worship and faith. Things will get worse for Job before they get better. He didn't get everything right, but because he feared God he moved toward him instead of running away from him. And at the end of the book Job's relationship with God was deeper and richer than at the beginning.

Something similar is true for us:

Takeaway: If we fear the Lord, our suffering can deepen our relationship with God.

The key is to relate to him as he really is in the midst of our suffering. We need to try to make the gap between our theology and how we relate to God as small as possible. For example, our theology tells you that God is omniscient; he knows everything about our suffering - why it's happening, how long it will last, etc. If we relate to him as One who knows everything about our suffering and is also radically for us, it will affect our thoughts and our prayers and our words. (Jesus reminded his disciples that God knows our needs before we ask; therefore we can ask with confidence.) If we fear God, we'll move toward him and appreciate things about him that we might have overlooked.

That's the end of the prologue. The next thirty-five chapters record how. . .

Job and his "Friends" debate the reason for Job's suffering. (Job 3-37) These chapters are difficult for me to read. They're rich and powerful, but they're painful for me because of what they express.

In chapter 3 Job curses the day he was born. He doesn't curse God, but he curses that he was even born. Having never been born would have been preferable to the misery he was experiencing. That's when his three friends couldn't stay silent; they spoke up and took turns trying to convince him that his suffering was the result of some sin(s) he had committed. Because of what we read in chapters 1 and 2 we know that's not true. Job feared God and was right with God.

It's important that we understand the logic and the theology of Job's friends because that theology is alive and well in our day. Tremper Longman, an Old Testament scholar, calls it "retribution theology" which can be summarized as: *If you sin, then you suffer; therefore, if you are suffering, it's because you have sinned.* The book of Proverbs tells us that that's **sometimes** true (see Proverbs 11:5-8); we do reap what we've sown. But retribution theology says that that's **always** true. Job's friends tried to convince him that he was suffering because he had sinned. (For example, see 4:7-8, 5:8-9, 5:17-18).

In response, Job repeatedly tells them that he was innocent of sinning against God. What's fascinating is that Job essentially agreed with his friends' retribution theology. He too believed that the righteous are rewarded and the unrighteous are punished. With that theology, he was left with a devastating conclusion: "Since I am suffering and since I have NOT sinned, God is unjust." Job got to the place where he accused God of treating him unjustly (see 9:11-16; 13:3, 15-19; 19:23-29).

Before the Lord answers Job a man named Elihu (who had been listening to the conversation) appears in chapter 32. For six chapters Elihu makes the exact same argument that the three friends had made: Job is suffering because he has sinned (see 36:2-6).

We'll see in a couple minutes that God tells Job that he (and by implication, his friends) were speaking "words without knowledge." They just kept talking and talking and talking even though they had no knowledge about what they were saying. None of them had any idea about the wager between God and Satan. Job's friends didn't know his heart. Job didn't know God's motives. But they kept talking.

Here's the takeaway for us:

Takeaway: When discussing suffering, be careful to avoid multiplying "words without knowledge." (Job 38:2, Proverbs 10:19)

There is a time for words. But when others are suffering, they usually don't want/need you to try to convince them that everything's going to work out okay (because in this world things don't always work out okay). They usually don't want you to try to explain WHY they're suffering or what God might be teaching them. Again, there's a time time for such conversation. . . but many times they need you to sit with them and weep. And when you are suffering, it's good to lament (as illustrated in the psalms). But we need to avoid saying things about God that contradict what we know about him from Scripture.

God finally speaks in chapter 38 . . .

The Lord responds to Job. (Job 38-42:6) Chapter 38 begins:

1 Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind and said:

Whenever God speaks out of a whirlwind, put on your seatbelt. Here's the tone of the next 4+ chapters:

2 "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?"

Job has been speaking "words without knowledge." His logic made perfect sense to him. But as we've known from chapters 1 and 2, Job's knowledge was very, very limited. He has been saying things about God that are not accurate. Next we learn that God isn't going to entertain questions *from* Job; God is going to ask questions *to* Job.

3 Dress for action like a man;
I will question you, and you make it known to me.

By my count, God asks Job 58 questions with lots of commentary along the way. Basically God's questions remind Job how little he controls and knows about the visible, created world; therefore he's certainly not in a position to make pronouncements about the unseen realm and the factors that figure into God's decisions there.

Two times the Lord pauses and Job speaks. The first time is in 40:3-5. There he admits that he has no answer to God's questions so he will remain quiet. At the very end of God's response to Job, we read this that Job repented (Job 42:1-6). That's what you do when you fear the Lord. Job admitted that he had spoken about things he didn't understand. It's incredibly significant that God didn't entertain Job's questions, didn't explain a thing about Job's suffering, and didn't apologize to Job. He convinced Job that he alone understood his suffering. He alone was wise.

The takeaway for us is the same:
Takeaway: Only God is wise.

Like Job and his friends, we too can get in trouble with our own logic and reasoning. When we're tempted to conclude that we could do a better job than God in running this world, we need to go back to Scripture, humble and teachable, and learn wisdom like Job did.

Epilogue: The Lord restores Job's prosperity. (Job 42:7-17)

Before the Lord restores Job's prosperity, he deals with Job's three friends (Elihu is ignored). The Lord tells them that he is angry with them because they had repeatedly spoken wrongly about him when they said he had brought suffering upon Job because he had sinned. What God tells them in verse 8 must have been very humbling. He tells them to go offer up sacrifices for yourselves in the presence of Job and he will pray for you.

8 . . . I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly. . .

Whereas Job feared the Lord and was wise, they had acted with folly/foolishness. Job was now basically their priest. Job would accept their sacrifices and pray for them. That's exactly what happened.

In verse 10 we read how God restored Job's prosperity:

10 And the Lord restored the fortunes of Job, when he had prayed for his friends.
And the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before.

The Lord blessed Job with twice as many sheep, camels, oxen, and female donkeys as he had in chapter 1. He also had seven sons and three daughters. The book of Job ends this way (42:16-17):

16 And after this Job lived 140 years, and saw his sons, and his sons' sons, four generations. 17 And Job died, an old man, and full of days.

Thus ends the book of Job. Some people don't like the ending of the book of Job because not everybody's life has a "happy ending." That's a valid point in this life. But for those of us living after the death and resurrection of Jesus, what if the happy ending of Job points past this life? The happy ending of Job foreshadows Someone else who

suffered catastrophic loss, who suffered innocently, but was ultimately vindicated and exalted: Jesus Christ.

Unlike Job, Jesus consciously and willingly suffered. Unlike Job, Jesus knew exactly why he was suffering - to pay for our sins. That's why we know God is radically for us.

Like Job, Jesus suffered even though he hadn't sinned. Like Job, Jesus was wrongly accused and mocked. Like Job, Jesus suffered at the hands of Satan. Like Job, Jesus prayed for his enemies as a priest before God. Like Job, Jesus was vindicated after he suffered and exalted to the right hand of God.

And the NT tells us that whatever happened to Jesus will happen to those who know him through faith. When he returns we will be given a body like his resurrection body - imperishable and uniquely suited for the new heaven and earth. And will be given an inheritance we can scarcely imagine.

That is the takeaway for us:

Takeaway: As Jesus' disciples, we can look forward to an inheritance greater than anything we've suffered or lost.

This doesn't trivialize our suffering, but it does put it in context. The last chapter of our lives hasn't been written yet. But if you are in Christ, the last chapter will involve you being given an inheritance greater than anything you've suffered or lost.