



Job: Coming to Grips with the
Mysteries of God, Man & Suffering

A Problem: Job: 42 Chapters in 30 Minutes

- ◆ An amazing book
- ◆ Some of the most wonderful poetry in all of human literature.
- ◆ Sandwiched between 2 short prose sections at the beginning and end, which let the reader know what is going on.

Origins

- ◆ The story is not first of all a Jewish one. It takes place in Uz - We don't know where that is. Job was not a member of the covenant people.
- ◆ The "clues" within the book from Job's situation would suggest it is from the patriarchal period.
- ◆ May even be among the oldest pieces of oral tradition found in the Hebrew Scriptures.
- ◆ But the story as we have it has been edited by a Jewish hand and presents a very Jewish theology. Most scholars date the final edition to somewhere between 1,000 and 700 B.C.

What Is the Book About?

- ◆ To understand the book's purpose we must first understand a little bit about Job's context which we gain from the first two chapters.
- ◆ At first glance the book is about a righteous man, named Job, who was very wealthy and very "religious." We get a little bit of insight into just how religious he was from the fact that every time his sons would have a party he would offer sacrifices for them - just in case they had sinned.
 - ✦ This could be out of concern for them, or
 - ✦ It could be out of concern for God. Or
 - ✦ A combination of both.
- ◆ We learn from the first two chapters that Job was protected by God. But a time of testing came. This raises a question that is never answered in the book and is never satisfactorily answered in the Bible itself - in so far as I understand the issue.
- ◆ If God knows the outcome of the test what is the point of the test? But this is a fact of God's dealing with us. He tested Israel in the wilderness. He tested His own Son to the extreme. He tests believers. It is all part of the mystery of God's dealing with us.

The First Test

- ◆ In the first test Satan is allowed to attack everything that Job owns, including his family, but is restricted from attacking Job himself.
- ◆ Job comes through the test with flying colours.

1:20 Then Job got up and tore his robe. He shaved his head, and then he threw himself down with his face to the ground. 1:21 He said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will return there. The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away. May the name of the Lord be blessed!" 1:22 In all this Job did not sin, nor did he charge God with moral impropriety.

- ◆ All his great possessions and even his children were to him a gift of God's grace and he held them "loosely."
- ◆ He possessed them - they did not possess him. Contrast with the rich young ruler in the Gospel who came to Jesus seeking to know how he might enter into life

The Rich Young Ruler

- ◆ After giving him the "stock answers" from the Jewish tradition the young ruler was still dissatisfied and sensed that he still lacked something, so Jesus told him to go, sell all that he had and give the proceeds to the poor and then to come follow him.
- ◆ Did Jesus really want to separate him from his wealth?
- ◆ I don't think so! Jesus just went to the heart of the problem and put his finger on what was holding the young ruler's heart and was the reason he was feeling unfulfilled in his life.
- ◆ He was possessed by his possessions, and Jesus with one insightful invitation revealed the young ruler to himself.
- ◆ Job's attitude is a model against which we may measure our own attachments to things and people.

The Second Test

- ◆ In the second test Satan is given permission to attack Job's person but is restricted from taking his life. Here again Job passes the test.
- ◆ At this point his wife has had enough

2:9 Then his wife said to him, "Are you still holding firmly to your integrity? Curse God, and die!" *2:10* But he replied, "You're talking like one of the godless women would do! Should we receive what is good from God, and not also receive what is evil?" In all this Job did not sin by what he said.
- ◆ Job's wife was clearly in the position of at least wanting to curse God. Because the focus of the book is on Job we often forget that it was not just Job who lost all he possessed including his family. His wife lost all of these things too and there was probably a very real sense in which she lost her husband too in his physical and emotional affliction.

The Second Test

- ◆ In challenging Job about holding on to his integrity towards God she was revealing that she felt it was inappropriate for him to do so in the context and from within the framework of their belief system.
 - ★ God is almighty
 - ★ God had behaved wrongly towards them
 - ★ Cursing God was a fit response.

Job's Friends

- ◆ Job's "comforters" have been immortalised in a negative way because far from their intention of comforting their friend they actually increase his suffering. With their well intentioned intervention they actually make matters worse.
- ◆ But they loved him - despite the callousness of some of their speeches.
 - ✦ They left their homes to go to him
 - ✦ When they arrived they tore their clothes and tossed dust into the air and over their heads - traditional acts of mourning
 - ✦ Then they sat for 7 days and nights in silence, in solidarity with their friend in his great grief. Sometimes a situation is so tragic that the only appropriate response is silence. Words will come later - they must - but for now in this moment of grief there can only be silence.
- ◆ The three friends are there to save their friend. But like Job's wife their "orthodoxy" (more about this later) led them to the wrong conclusion and after Job broke his silence their well intentioned intervention just added to his suffering

A Popular Misconception

- ◆ Most people think the book of Job is about Job's patience and his perseverance in suffering. But if that is what the book is about then it can be concluded at the end of chapter two. But it goes on for another 40 chapters.
- ◆ By far the greatest test for Job was to maintain his integrity and his sense of himself in the face of the arguments and persuasions of his wife, and 4 friends.
- ◆ Carlo Martini perceptively points out that the great acts of submission to God that Job makes in the first two chapters must now be worked out in the daily grind of life. That is a real struggle. The act of submission, real and genuine as it is, like the act of faith in conversion, must be lived out day by day - by no means an easy task and one that requires all our internal resources.

What Is the Book About?

- ◆ St. Jerome, the church father who translated the Bible into Latin - the version we know as the "Latin Vulgate," compared Job to an eel. *"The harder we try to lay hold of it's meaning the more it slips through our fingers."*
- ◆ There's truth in that but at the same time it is the inspired Word of God and God does intend that we benefit from it, and we can only do that by understanding it - at least to some degree.
- ◆ This is not to say that we ever fully master its meaning because it deals with subjects that have vexed humanity through all it's generations - specifically, the problem of human suffering and the goodness and justice of God.

The Problem of Suffering and the Goodness of God

- ◆ The manner in which the problem is conceived and addressed is uniquely an Israelite way of viewing it.
- ◆ The Greek and later Western way of framing it has been:
"How can the justice of an almighty God be defended in the face of evil, especially human suffering - and even more particularly, the suffering of the innocent?"
- ◆ In this form of the question three possible assumptions are left open:
 1. God is not almighty
 2. God is not just (that there is a "demonic" element in his being)
 3. Man may be innocent

Ancient Israel

- ◆ The unquestioned biblical way of coming at the problem likewise had three assumptions
 1. God is almighty
 2. He is perfectly just
 3. No human being is wholly innocent in his sight.
- ◆ These three assumptions were also fundamental to the theology of Job and his friends.
- ◆ From these three assumptions there can only be one conclusion about suffering:

Every person's suffering is indicative of the extent to which (s)he is guilty before God

Ancient Israel

- ◆ As an abstract concept, this conclusion appeared
 1. inescapable,
 2. logically imperative, and
 3. theologically satisfying.
- ◆ Hence in the context of such theology the issue of the justice of God and human suffering was not a problem because its solution was self-evident.
- ◆ But what was thus theologically self-evident in the abstract was often in radical tension with actual human experience, because
- ◆ there are always those who are genuinely godly, morally upright, and who, though not sinless, keep themselves from serious sins, but who nevertheless, suffer greatly.
- ◆ For these the self-evident theology, (*i.e. wisdom = virtuous living = success*), brings no consolation and offers no guidance. Such was the situation of Job

The Weakness of the "Self-Evident" Theology

- This self-evident theology, which is very pronounced in Deuteronomy and the deuteronomical writings as well as in the Book of Proverbs, (indeed as one commentator wrote, *"it is writ large from Genesis to Malachi"*), only gave rise to a great enigma - a great mystery.
- And God, himself, to whom the sufferer had always previously turned in times of need and distress became Himself the overwhelming enigma - the overwhelming mystery.
- In Job 3 - 37 we hear on the one hand the flawless logic and wounding thrusts of Job's three friends plus Elihu (chapter 37), who insist on the "orthodox" theology, and, on the other hand, the anguish of the righteous sufferer, Job, who suffers with the great enigma. I.e., he knows he is righteous and he also knows God is just. But if the first is true, his suffering is unjust because it is undeserved. If the second is true then God has somehow "forgotten" or overlooked him.
- In the book we have Job suffering this internal anguish because his experience is painfully out of sync with his theology and his suffering is made far more severe by the wounds that are inflicted by his well-intentioned friends
- Job is thus a graphic portrayal of the unique form of the "just God and human suffering" issue experienced by righteous sufferers within orthodox Israel - and I may add, in the church today. *Good people are, at times, demonised and cast out by "orthodox" but inadequate theologies.*

Reflect for a Moment

- ◆ Think about Job. His faith is "orthodox" and includes the elements we described: God is almighty and He is perfectly just.
- ◆ At this point in time there was no solid belief in life after death, so blessing and suffering, reward and punishment must occur in this life as the consequence of what one has done.
- ◆ Job's experience is horrendous. He is first of all hit with the loss of everything he owned. This is quickly followed by his 7 sons and 3 daughters getting killed in a tornado. Then in the second test he is subsequently afflicted with physical suffering and becomes an outcast as a consequence of the application of "orthodox" theology.
- ◆ Job's friends spend 34 chapters tormenting him with the theological answers that, up to this point, were *the very foundation of His own belief system*.
- ◆ His friends are well intentioned. But according to theological orthodoxy there can be only one explanation for all this suffering - Job must have sinned grievously and they are determined to "recover" him, to restore him to God and to God's blessing.
- ◆ Job knows in himself he doesn't deserve this. Everything he has believed about the justice and righteousness of God is rocked to its foundations.
- ◆ But now in his experience, a great big "BUT" enters his life. "Yes BUT....." His theology is on the brink of change as a consequence of his experience.

Reflection cont'd....

- ◆ I don't want you to lose the significance of this point because it is as relevant today as it was 1,000 years before Christ.
- ◆ We have reached the heart of the matter. We are now at the foundational "*why*" for the Book of Job.
- ◆ "Orthodox" biblical theology is not adequate for each and every situation. It is "generally" correct but not universally correct.
- ◆ What has "biblical orthodoxy" to say to an Abraham who claims to have heard God tell him to offer his son in sacrifice?
- ◆ Suppose you are elders in the church that Abraham attends. One day he tells you that He has heard from God and he is going to sacrifice his son, Isaac! How do you respond?

Reflection, cont'd...

- ◆ The Book of Job is a solemn reminder that our attempts to defend the order of God may not be honouring to him at all. Although Job is overwhelmed by God to the point that he is brought to silence and submission, God, in the end, takes his side — the side of the man who had challenged the divine rule — and Job must offer sacrifices for his three friends (42:7-8; cf. Barr 1971:46).

Suffering & Judgement

- ◆ In discussing suffering and judgement at this point I'm not referring to the judgement of God, but rather the type of judgement Job's friends subjected him to. It's the kind of judgement the church is also very good at.
- ◆ Within the community of faith, whether for Job or in the church, affliction / suffering more often than not brings judgement instead of understanding.
- ◆ For so many people being afflicted means having to live with the sentences pronounced by people who are distanced from the consequences we endure.
- ◆ Frequently, on top of the affliction we often have to suffer the imposition of other people's values on our lives.
- ◆ As in the case of Job's 3 friends judgement is almost always misplaced. It is as fallible as those who dispense it and is frequently nothing more than the projection of the "judge's" own failure / weakness on to the suffering one.

Suffering & Judgement

- ◆ Judgement will never be fair, for no human being can ever know the whole truth of the afflicted one's story. Job's friends had no evidence of wrong-doing in Job.
- ◆ All they had to go on was his suffering. So what they did was they worked back from that to a conclusion, (judgement), that Job must have committed some great sin - perhaps even unconsciously - and they pressed their judgement mercilessly against him, increasing the suffering he felt.
- ◆ It may be human nature to judge, but we need to remember, it is the same human nature that corrupts every judgement we make.

Suffering & Judgement

- ◆ Only God can judge with absolute accuracy and fairness.
- ◆ When we judge we should do so with a humility that recognises that, at best, our judgement can only be provisional and that it may well be wrong - just like it was in the case of Job's friends.
- ◆ To do otherwise is to usurp the role of God by infringing on His divine prerogative as judge.
- ◆ Judgement inevitably becomes another burden upon the sufferer because it rubs salt into already painful wounds.
- ◆ We must recognise, too, that our judging comes out of our perspectives. In the church that inevitably means out of our "orthodoxies" which are shaped by our culture and the traditions that formed us.
- ◆ Frequently, there are other perspectives which are just as honestly held, formed out of wrestling with the same biblical texts but from different contexts.

The Problem with the "Orthodox" Theology

- ◆ The problem with the orthodox theology that the author highlights in Job is that it starts from an inadequate understanding of the purposes of God. It fails to see that God may have other purposes than merely the exercise of retributive justice issuing in either blessings or curses. (*I.e. Virtuous living leads to success = blessing. Wickedness leads to all kinds of loss = curse*).
- ◆ The question that the Satan poses to God that kick-starts the trials of Job is one of the most important in the Bible: *Do human beings serve God for themselves and their own profit?*
- ◆ Or stated more abstractly, *"Is disinterested faith in, and service to God possible?"*
- ◆ With this question every reader of Job is put on a hook of self-examination and is drawn into the drama of the book.
- ◆ More importantly, the question exposes the inadequacy of the "orthodox" theology. With a theology for living that is rooted in retributive justice alone, (*reward for faithfulness, punishment for faithlessness*), the whole enterprise of faith in God risks collapse into self-interested programmes for success.
- ◆ This, I believe, is the fundamental error of the health and wealth gospel of today.

The Problem with the "Orthodox" Theology

- ◆ Job's friends "are not willing to leave a margin of uncertainty, to admit limits to their understanding, to write after each of their theses, *"If God so wills!"* All the workings of divine providence must be clear to them, explicit, mathematical .
- ◆ "They have fallen victims to the occupational hazard of theologians: they forget they are dealing with mystery. They have "studied" God as a subject to be analysed, predicted and understood.
- ◆ "and in forcing facts to agree with their understanding, they become wilfully dishonest." (MacKenzie & Murphy)

Correction of the Errors in Job and His Friends

- ◆ "The correction of the friends' distortion is comparatively simple and can be accomplished by Job himself.
- ◆ "His own error is more subtle, and his correction must come from God. In his arguments he makes no connection between his suffering and divine justice. But that loyal simplicity is not sufficient to refute the friends' accusations, and in maintaining his innocence as though God were denying it, he overvalued it.
- ◆ "It (his innocence) is not a bargaining counter, it is not a token he can hold up to God saying, '*For this you owe me happiness.*'"
- ◆ "He is in the right against his friends; he is not in the right against God. He can make no claim on Him.
- ◆ "Job must insist on his integrity, but he cannot say, "God must." (Ibid.)

The Correction of Job

- ◆ At the end of the book God shows up. He addresses Job in a couple of speeches that leave Job speechless

Where were you when I?

- ◆ Through these questions God gives Job a vision of His greatness in creation and governing the world
- ◆ At the same time the questions show Job the limitations of his knowledge and understanding. He recognises that his questioning of God's justice was foolishness
- ◆ His response is to repent in dust and ashes

A Changed Job?

- ◆ Until the Lord appeared out of the whirlwind, Job complained that God was apathetic, blind to injustice, hidden, and unresponsive.
- ◆ For the four counsellors certainly the justice of God was most prominent in their theology, with sovereignty nearly as important.
- ◆ Since Job said so little after God spoke to him, it is hard to know what his new view of God was; certainly *it would have acknowledged God's power, faithfulness, generosity, and mercy.*
- ◆ That God spoke to Job at all was *the ultimate honour for Job* and by itself would have rectified most of his misconceptions.

Tis Mystery All....

- ◆ The book of Job does not resolve the rational question of the problem of the innocent suffering.
- ◆ The story of Job suggests that, in human experience, the cause of individual suffering *may remain forever a mystery*. Readers are privy to the reason for Job's anguish, but Job himself will never learn of the challenge in the courts of heaven that so drastically changed his life.
- ◆ The quest for wisdom does not lead us to explain the order of the universe *but to live within it under the sovereign control of God*.
- ◆ A large portion of the dialog is an attempt to explain the order of the world in terms of justice and retribution; *but in the end this effort is condemned by God*.
- ◆ "Job's friends cherished religious conviction more than a vital relationship with the living God, *for they believed in a rational deity who was enslaved by a greater principle: justice*" (Crenshaw 1981:118)

Application.....,

- ◆ Many Christians would like to blame the devil for all manner of unpleasantness from minor occasions of bad luck to the most severe of human tragedies — loss of wealth, children, health, and honour.
- ◆ But the message of Job is that nothing happens to us that is not ultimately controlled by the knowledge, love, wisdom, and power of our God who is the God of all comfort (2 Cor 1:3).
- ◆ Like Job, we need to learn that we live and die by grace and that all of life must be lived by faith - faith that God is good and is completely aware of everything that crosses our path. We must believe that he knows all about us and *“that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, and who have been called according to his purpose”* (Rom 8:28).
- ◆ *“What cannot be comprehended through reason must be embraced in love.”*

God Leads a Pretty Sheltered Life

At the end of time billions of people were scattered on a great plain before God's throne. Some of the groups near the front talked heatedly, not with cringing shame but with belligerence;

"How can God judge us; how can He know about suffering?" snapped an angry brunette. She jerked back a sleeve to reveal a tattooed number from a Nazi concentration camp. "We endured terror, beatings, torture and death!"

In another group, a black man lowered his collar. "What about this?" he demanded, showing an ugly rope burn. "Lynched for no crime but being black. We have suffocated in slave ships, been wrenched from loved ones, bought and sold like chattels, and toiled till only death gave release."

Far out across the plain were hundreds of such groups. Each had a complaint against God for the evil and suffering He permitted in His world. How lucky God was to live in heaven where all was sweetness and light; where there was no weeping, no fear, no hunger, no hatred. Indeed, what did God know about what man has been forced to endure in this world? "After all, God leads a pretty sheltered life," they said.

So each group sent out a leader, chosen because he or she had suffered the most. There was a Jew, a black, an untouchable from India, an illegitimate woman, a person from Hiroshima, and one from a Siberian slave camp. There was a victim of the death squads in El Salvador, a Palestinian refugee, a Muslim woman from Bosnia, who suffered under the horrors of ethnic cleansing. There was a sacada from a sugar plantation in the Philippines who had lived in debt slavery all his life..... The list was a long and heartbreaking role call of human misery. In the center of the plain, they consulted with each other. At last they were ready to present their case. It was rather simple: Before God could be qualified to be their judge, He must endure what they had endured. Their decision was that God "should be sentenced to live on earth -- as a man!"

But because He was God they set certain safeguards to be sure He could not use His divine powers to help himself.

Let him be born a Jew.

Let the legitimacy of his birth be doubted, so that no one will know who is really his father.

Let His family be forced to flee their homeland and become refugees because of the hatred of a tyrant who perceived in Him a threat to his position of power.

Let Him champion a cause so just, but so radical, that it brings down upon Him the hate, condemnation, and elimination efforts of every major traditional and established religious and political authority.

Let Him try to describe what no human person has ever seen, tasted, heard, or smelled, and let Him try to communicate God to man.

Let Him be betrayed by His dearest friends.

Let him be indicted on false charges, tried before a prejudiced jury, and convicted by a cowardly judge.

Let Him see what it is to be terribly alone and completely abandoned by every living thing.

Let Him be tortured and let Him die! Let him die the most humiliating death with common thieves.

Let his name be mentioned as a blasphemous swear word.

As each leader announced his or her portion of the sentence, loud murmurs of approval went up from the great throng of people. When the last had finished pronouncing sentence, there was a long silence. No one uttered another word! No one moved! For suddenly all knew God had already served his sentence.