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1 Suffering

JOB 1



DISCOVER

the story behind the story
of suffering.



LEARN

how you can defeat Satan's
purpose by your response
to pain.



WORSHIP

as you see what Jesus Christ
accomplished in His suffering.

GENESIS is the first book in the Bible, but Job is the oldest. The story comes from the time of Abraham or before, and the book of Job may well be one of the oldest books in the world. It is also one of the most important, because it deals with some of the deepest questions you will ever face in your life.

Job is the first of the Bible's wisdom books, that is books that deal with the skills we need for navigating our way through life. It also contains one of the most dramatic and compelling stories in the Bible.

When God chose to speak to us about suffering, He did not give us a book of philosophy. When we are in deep personal pain, we do not have a great deal of interest in theory or arguments. God speaks to us through a real-life experience of a man who suffered and records for us his thoughts and his struggles. As you enter Job's struggles, God will speak into your pain. Wherever you look in human history, pain is still pain, and God is still God.

THE GREATEST MAN IN THE EAST

Job was an outstanding man in every way. We are told that he was "blameless" and "upright" (1:1). This did not mean that he was perfect, but it did mean that if people were looking for anything to stick on him, they wouldn't find it. The same word is used in the New Testament for Christian leaders. They are to be "blameless" (Titus 1:6). No leaders are perfect but they must be above reproach. That was true of Job. He "feared God" and he "shunned evil" (Job 1:1). That means

that he experienced the same temptations that all the rest of us do, but he had learned to push them off. He shunned evil, and the reason he was able to do this was because he feared God. Indeed, “he was the greatest man in the East” (v.3).

The second thing that we learn about Job is that he was wealthy. He had been highly successful and God had blessed him. In those days, wealth was measured in livestock. We are told that he had seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, and five hundred donkeys (v. 3). His total net worth was pretty impressive.

We are also told that Job had seven sons and three daughters (v. 2), and it seems that they may have represented the one shadow on his horizon. The one thing that we are told about them is that their lives were an endless round of parties. “His sons used to take turns holding feasts in their homes” (v. 4). Their whole lifestyle seems to have been built around the pursuit of pleasure. If you had asked them what they were living for, they would have said, “We live for the weekend. We get our work done, and then we all have a blast.”

Job did not like what they were doing. In fact after the parties were over, he used to offer a sacrifice for each of his children. He did this “thinking, ‘Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts’” (v. 5).

If you had spoken to Job’s sons or daughters, you would have thought them to be fine, upright people, but Job was worried that what they said and what they thought were two different things. He was worried about what was in their hearts, and it would not have surprised him if, when the wine had loosened some of their inhibitions, they had cursed God.

So here is a man who was wonderfully blessed, but had one nagging fear that haunted his mind. He felt that what was going on in his family was not pleasing to God.

CATASTROPHE

Then one day everything in Job’s life changed. The day was like any other—until a terrified servant broke through the door of the house with desperate news. “The oxen were plowing and the donkeys were grazing nearby, and the Sabeans attacked and carried them off. They put the servants to the sword, and I am the only one who has escaped” (vv. 14–15).

Job did not have time to take this appalling news in, because while the servant was still speaking, another messenger came with the news that the sheep and other servants had been killed in what was probably something like a lightning storm.

“The fire of God fell from the sky and burned up the sheep and the servants, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!” (v. 16).

While he was still speaking, a third messenger arrived with news that three raiding parties of Chaldeans had swept down from the hills and taken off the camels. Then a fourth messenger arrived with the worst news of all. Job’s sons and daughters had been eating and drinking at one of their parties, and suddenly the house was hit by a mighty wind that swept in from the desert. The house collapsed on them, and all of them were dead (v. 19).

In one day this man lost every familiar landmark of his life. His business was destroyed, his wealth was plundered, and his entire family tragically killed. It all happened in one day. By any standards, this is a catalog of unspeakable suffering.

GOD’S PEOPLE WILL SUFFER

Bad things happen to good people. Sometimes terrible things happen to wonderful people, and God allows it to be so. The Scripture tells us Job was “the greatest man among all the people of the East” (v. 3). So the story of Job clearly teaches us that the pursuit of a godly life will not put us beyond suffering.

Many Christians have an instinctive feeling that if we pursue a life of worship and service, it would be a reasonable expectation that God would keep us from significant suffering in our lives. But there is no such deal on the table. The book of Job makes that very clear. Christian faith does not inoculate us against suffering in a fallen world. That is why it is an absolute travesty of the gospel to suggest that if people come to Jesus, all their problems will be over. God does not immunize His people against suffering.

At the heart of the Bible story, we learn that the greatest and most godly person who ever lived suffered more than any other. He was rejected by His family. He wept at the graveside of one of His dearest friends. He was betrayed and suffered injustice, and then He was crucified. When He calls us to walk in His footsteps, that includes following Him into the mystery that He experienced, of the suffering God allows in the life of a godly man or woman.

When you suffer, you will probably ask the question “Why?” Jesus did. But you should not ask the question “Why is this happening to me?” That question betrays a mind-set that says, “It may be appropriate that this should happen to other people but not to me.” Your faith in Christ does not and will not ever give you immunity from suffering. The apostle Peter wrote us, “Do not be surprised at the

painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you” (1 Peter 4:12). So the important question to ask is not “Why does suffering happen?” but “How can a man stand when all the navigating points of his life disappear?”

GOD’S PEOPLE WILL FEEL PAIN

It is a wonderful thing that God has given us a whole book of the Bible that recounts the inner struggle of a believing man who faced terrible suffering.

The book of Job gives the lie to the superficial idea that if we “Take it to the Lord in prayer” this will somehow remove the pain. Job discovered that prayer does not act as an anesthetic. C. S. Lewis described this powerfully in his book *A Grief Observed*. In the deep pain that followed the death of his wife, Lewis felt that his attempts at prayer were like coming up against a great door that was then shut in your face, with the sound of bolting and double bolting inside, and then silence.

Lewis was discovering what Isaiah describes when he said that the Lord is “a God who hides himself” (Isaiah 45:15). God reveals Himself in Scripture and in Christ, but He also hides Himself, and we do not speak about God correctly unless we have grasped both these things. He has revealed Himself so we may know Him and love Him and trust Him; but He also hides Himself, so that there are times when we will say, “I just don’t understand; I can’t make any sense of His ways.” There will be times when our heart will shout out *Why?* and there will be no answer.

Job’s friends tried to comfort him. They said many things, some misguided, some true. But Job was not able to hear them. There were times in the past when he would have enjoyed a theological discussion with his friends, but now their words seem to float outside him and beyond him. He was simply overwhelmed by the pain.

Later in the story, the comfort of God broke through to him, but it was a long time coming, and Job never pretended that he was experiencing comfort when he was not. There is a relentless honesty about this man, and he refuses to say what he does not experience. “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” (Job 3:25–26).

God’s people are not always so honest. Perhaps the reason for that is that we are afraid of “not having the answers.” Job’s testimony releases us from the pressure of feeling that we have to say things are well when they are not. There are times of pain and turmoil when peace seems to be beyond our grasp. And we must not be afraid of this; this was the experience of the greatest man in the east.

If the Christian life is presented as a life of constant victory in which the triumphs are always greater than the pain, and the certainties are always greater than the questions, then Christian people will not be able to make sense of their experience when the pain seems greater than the victory, and the questions seem greater than the answers.

I thank God for a book of the Bible that tells me the greatest man of his time struggled in deep darkness with unresolved questions, and battled with a level of pain that his closest friends could not begin to understand. And yet in all of this, he did not sin against God.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Here we come to one of the most fascinating scenes in the whole of the Bible. In Job 1 God pulls back a curtain so that we can get a glimpse of another story that is going on behind the pain that Job experienced. God wants us to know that there was more at stake in this story than Job ever knew or could begin to understand.

There is an old war movie that I have seen many times, but every time I see it, I discover something else going on in the plot. *Where Eagles Dare* tells the story of a group of special agents who are dropped behind enemy lines supposedly to rescue a captured military commander who has information that is crucial to the outcome of the war.

In actual fact, the man who has been captured is not a commander at all, but an actor who has no information whatever. The real reason for the mission is to flush out the identity of an enemy agent who has penetrated the secret service, and whose continued presence there would spell disaster for millions of people. The team thinks that they are risking everything to rescue one man from torture and death, but in fact they are involved in a far greater mission that has not yet been revealed to them. The outcome involves much more than the safety of one man; it involves the destiny of a whole nation.

The only person who really knows what is going on is the team leader, played by Richard Burton. His lieutenant, an American played by Clint Eastwood, has an implicit trust in his leader, but at times that trust is strained to the limit. His life is on the line a thousand times as he jumps from cable cars to escape the enemy, but it is not until the very last scene in the film that he discovers what the whole mission was really all about.

There is a story behind the story, and it is extremely difficult to make any sense of

the film if you don't know the story behind the story, which is why I have enjoyed watching the film a number of times!

So what is the story behind the story of Job? What is really at stake as this man makes his journey through suffering? The book of Job tells us about a particular day when God summoned the angels to present themselves before Him, and we are told that Satan came with them.

The story behind the story is about vindicating the name of God.

The Bible is quite clear that in the beginning, God not only created the earth, but also the heavens. Alongside the visible creation, God also fashioned a creation that is invisible to us. The Bible indicates that evil originated in the heavenly creation before it ever infected the earthly creation. Lucifer (morning star) was an angel of God who wanted to take the place of God (Isaiah 14:12–15). His rebellion was unsuccessful and led to his being excluded from the presence of God and cast down to the earth. So right from the beginning of human history there was an enemy, bent on destroying the work of God. So in Genesis 3, we find this enemy coming to the first man and woman in a quest to involve human beings in his own rebellion against God.

This sets the stage for the great drama of human history in which God will redeem sinners. He will bring such a transformation within them that they will love good more than evil, truth more than lies, and God more than themselves. That is the big story behind our little lives.

In Job, God pulls back the curtain on the drama that was taking place in heaven. We're told that Satan, now an outcast of heaven, was summoned to stand before God.

"Have you considered my servant Job?" God asks the evil one. "There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil" (Job 1:8).

Satan uses the occasion to slander the name of God. "Does Job fear God for nothing?" (v. 9). In effect, Satan is telling God, "The only reason Job fears You is raw self-interest. You think that he loves You freely, but that's impossible! It cannot be done. Job is a man, and men love themselves!"

"Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land." (v. 10)

Satan is saying, "Of course he will profess to be a lover of God as long as You give

him everything that he wants; but take away his wealth, take away his work, take away his family, take away his health, and he will surely curse You to Your face.”

Satan, who himself had rejected God’s law and authority, was telling God, “Nobody could love You for who You are! Men may love the gifts of God, but sin is so deep that men will never come to love You for who You are.” Satan was convinced that sin is an incurable disease, and that restoration from sin is impossible. No man could love God for His own sake.

So God says, “Let’s see.”

Job never knew the story behind the story. As far as he was concerned, this whole thing is about one man struggling to come to terms with a series of unexplained tragedies in his life. But something much more important is going on. The story behind the story is about vindicating the name of God.

The Bible never suggests that every experience of suffering is a direct result of the activity of Satan. Even in this story where Satan’s activity was a direct factor in Job’s suffering, his activity was within strict limits that were determined by God. But when suffering comes into your life, whatever its shape or cause, you have the opportunity to vindicate the name of God.

SAME PROBLEM: DIFFERENT RESPONSE

When tragedy came to this family, it produced two entirely different responses from Job and his wife. Job’s wife said to him, “Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die!” (Job 2:9). That was exactly what the devil had figured she would say. Suffering did to Job’s wife exactly what Job feared wine might do to his children; it lowered her inhibitions and exposed what she thought.

But Job’s reaction was entirely different.

Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship. (v. 20; EMPHASIS ADDED)

When Job worshiped, Satan was confounded. The worship of an ordinary man in the middle of his suffering vindicates the name of God. Job’s worship must have reverberated among the angels of heaven. I like to think about Satan shrinking back in silence, dumbfounded by the power of the grace of God in the life of this ordinary man.

Your response to God in times of trouble will be one of the most revealing things about you. For Job’s wife, integrity was a means to an end. As far as she was

concerned, it was God's responsibility to fill her life with good things, keep the family healthy, and keep the business prospering. As long as that continued, she "loved" God. But when suffering came to this couple, their different responses were telling: Job loved God for who He is; his wife loved God for what He gave. One loved God unconditionally; the other loved God as a means to an end. One proved that the devil is sometimes right; the other gave evidence that the devil is finally wrong.

I will always remember the evening when about twenty members of our congregation met to share their stories of loss. I had become aware that a number of our people had walked through the dark valley of the death of a son or a daughter. Each of the families who came had the opportunity to tell their story. People spoke about what they had found most difficult, and also about what had helped them the most.

"I asked why
and never got
an answer!"

There were many tears and a strong sense of the fellowship that you discover when you recognize a reflection of your own experience in somebody else's story.

"I asked why and never got an answer!"

"I felt angry with God, and then I wondered if I should feel that way."

"The pain is still with me now."

But at the end of the evening one thing stood out to me more than any other. Here were twenty people who had experienced inexpressible pain. None of them could explain why it happened. Their suffering is a mystery to them, and the pain of it is with them still, *and yet every one of them loves God.*

How do you explain that? I know people whose suffering has been much less who say that they hate God! But here are people who have endured great suffering and yet truly love Him. Satan has no answer to that, so he falls like lightning, as the angels rejoice at the vindication of the name of God. It is possible for a man to love God freely, and to love Him not simply as a means to an end, but to love Him for who He is.

Job never knew the big story of what was at stake in his suffering. If he had a conversation with the angels after he died and went into the presence of God, they may well have said:

"Job, when we heard Satan slander the name of God we trembled, and we held our breath as we watched to see what you would do. God placed His name and His reputation on the line. And Job, when you worshiped, we can't tell you the shouts

of joy and triumph that went up here as we watched the enemy shrink away in defeat and humiliation!”

In the New Testament, the apostle Peter writes to suffering believers and says that their trials “have come so that your faith...may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed” (1 Peter 1:7).

SPOTLIGHT ON CHRIST

I cannot think about this story without my mind running forward to the suffering of Christ. He was brought before a prejudiced judge and indicted on charges brought by false witnesses, but none of this made Him ask why. He was paraded through the streets; He was beaten, stripped, flogged, and crucified; but none of this made Him ask why.

But then as He hung on the cross, darkness covered the land and the comfort of God was withdrawn from His soul. He was entering into the heart of His suffering as He bore the sins of the world. Then He “cried out in a loud voice, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani,’ —which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’” (Matthew 27:46).

There was no answer to His question. Yet in the mystery of His unspeakable suffering, His final words were worship: “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”

Then He breathed his last, and that splintered the gates of hell.

UNLOCKED

God does not give us an explanation of suffering, but He does tell us how we can stand in it. Our greatest need when suffering comes is not an explanation but the ability to withstand the pressure and to come through the struggle in a way that brings honor to God.

There may come a time in your life when you are facing the mystery of great suffering, and from deep inside, you will be asking, “What does God want of me?” The answer is, “God wants that you should love Him still,” because when you do that, you bring glory to His name, and expose the enemy for the liar and slanderer he is.

The greatest evidence of a true work of God in a human soul is that when God allows a person to suffer, he or she loves Him still. That testimony may be more powerful than anything else that you do in the service of Christ.

PAUSE FOR PRAYER

Gracious Father,

Help those who are in great pain and distress to see Your greatness and to find strength in You. Help me to accept that there are many questions that I will never be able to answer this side of heaven, and to find peace in knowing that You know what is hidden from me.

Help me to love You for who You are and not just for what You give, so that my worship in times of trouble may bring glory to Your name. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.