

Reflections on the Book of Job

Probably the very first Scripture penned – and perhaps because it is that – Job is a story whose theme anticipates all of salvation history. It's a book that's easily misunderstood, supposedly having to do with why good people suffer. Yes, that is there. But more, a *lot* more, is in this book. We covered this book in some detail about 5 years ago. Still, it's important enough to look at again to see if there may be fresh insights. We need to think about this book often and deeply.

The book is strange, or mysterious, in its organization. The first two chapters introduce the theme, and the last few chapters give only somewhat of a resolution. And all the chapters in the middle consist of rather monotonous dialogue. Perhaps this is intentional: the structure of the book anticipates the working out of all of biblical history.

The first five verses in the book are a set-up. Job is not only wealthy, he really fears God. He knows God judges us, and he knows we are prone to sin. And he knows to offer sacrifices for sin to appease a holy and just God. Then the rest of chapters 1 and 2 seem massively unfair. Why, of all people, does this good person, Job, have to suffer such horrors? Is there no justice in this world? Is God not just? In the end, Job experiences restoration, and that satisfies. Yet the book ends and we're left wondering, Where was the justice in all this? The book isn't so much about suffering as it is Justice. Cosmic justice. Justice for humanity. If God is infinitely just, how is all this evil explained, how is it dealt with? No answer. We're supposed to ponder these issues.

The dialogue between Satan and God in the first two chapters is striking. Satan is arrogant, insolent in the extreme. Who does he think he is, daring to challenge God as he does here. His first words to God are a lie. A partial truth is a lie still. He says he was just touring earth. OK, but *why*? The reason is obvious: to learn how to subvert humanity, to provoke humans to do evil so that God must then punish them. Satan evidently hates God's beloved human creatures. And he must hate God too. So he has this wickedly devious strategy, which is to trick humans into sinning so that God must then punish those whom He loves. Imagine, Satan wants to hurt even God! But Satan's still God's servant and must obey Him. Let's notice that it's God who initiates this challenge. God is drawing Satan into a trap! Let's also observe that Satan is a fool. Already, we've learned something important: evil is stupid. God is sovereign and wise, and He judges every creature that exists. And that includes Satan.

"Does Job fear God for nothing?" is Satan's taunt. What that means, according to Satan's exhaustive knowledge of human psychology, is that Job only is righteous to be or to get on the good side of God. Job wants to get something out of it. His righteousness is only so that God will have to reward him with wealth and health and peace and etc. Satan cynically supposes that both Job *and* God hold to a strictly mechanical view of morality. Good is rewarded, bad is punished. If properly programmed, a computer could do as well as God.

The experiment Satan suggests is pure wickedness. It's the only strategy he knows. Take away the blessings and Job will automatically, in machinery-like behavior, curse You. Then God will have to punish Job, and Job will no longer be God's model of righteousness. So Job will no longer glorify God. That's because, in Satan's mind, God is not worthy of glory. God is not glorious. Satan evidently thinks he himself is.

In 1:12, God gives Satan permission to do evil. Most readers choke on this. Yet because God is omniscient, He knows the outcome. Satan is foolish for not realizing that God wouldn't have allowed this experiment without already knowing its outcome, but he goes ahead with it anyhow. Evil is stupid. Let's learn this lesson: God is good. He knows the end from the beginning. And all that He does – or allows to be done – is under His exquisite control and for His good purposes.

The calamities Job experiences are all Satan's doing. Observe the awesome power Satan wields: he can cause natural disasters and incite wars, massacres and crimes. Even cause sicknesses. Satan is formidable. "Skin for skin" (2:4) is Satan's motto. He supposes that everyone has a price. Even, in a perverse way, to do evil. If Job suffers hard enough, such as a serious threat to his life, he'll bend to Satan's will. Astonishingly, God allows this! Of course it was necessary to spare Job's life to see how Job would respond. Nevertheless, we should observe that God places limits on what evil Satan may do.

Job's explanation (1:21) of what happened to his family and his possessions is fatalistic, yet trusting. He knows that God is good. He even worships God in spite of all the loss. Yet Chapter 1 ends with, "Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing." Well good for Job, but we need to ask, in all honesty, why not? God did, after all, allow Satan to do all this to Job. Job's response to his wife's taunt (2:9) anticipates all the dialogue coming for the next 35 chapters. It's not just

his wife who speaks foolishness, so will his 3 friends. Job's, "Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" still sounds fatalistic, yet trusting. Whatever happens to us in life, God is good.

Job's friends came "to comfort him." That's good for a laugh. What they will do is accuse him of being a sinner and deserving of all this suffering as punishment. Job's response will be to vent and lament, but also to reject the mechanical moralism of his 3 friends. Job has no idea what is happening in heaven, but he knows this, he did no wrong. The suffering he experienced had no explanation, but it certainly wasn't deserved. He's anguished, defensive, and bitter even, but he's not angry at God. He doesn't understand evil.

At the center of the Book is a chapter that's totally different from all the others. Chapter 28 is a poem, a hymn to wisdom. It's as if the Book has as its central theme the wisdom of God in the presence of a world saturated with evil. "And [God] said to man, 'The fear of the Lord – that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding'" (28:28). What lesson do we take away from the Book of Job? Fear God, in all that that word involves (know, love, trust, serve, worship), and pursue righteousness. As for knowing the source and cause and end of evil, well, leave that to God. In this Book's middle section are a series of speeches by this or that person, but what's needed is not human ethical speculation or human ideas of morality and justice, but God's wisdom.

The last five chapters are God's response to Job's questioning. And surprise! God gives Job no explanation. Instead, God reveals His awesome Person to Job. He is sovereign Creator of all that exists. He is in control of everything. He is worthy of our trust, regardless what life throws at us. We need to be humble and acknowledge our creatureliness, but we're beloved by God, who is good. Job's reply at the end sums up what our attitude should be in the presence of suffering and evil: "I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted" (42:2). In other words, God has a plan to deal with evil, with Satan. And whatever that plan is, we can trust Him to carry it out in His time and in His way.

Job got no explanation at the end because none was needed. Whatever cosmic struggle or wager or whatever it is that's going on in heaven is not our business. But it's major. Job (indeed, all humanity) is collateral damage, a participant in some way, but not the primary issue. The more basic issue seems to be Satan and evil itself. There are no consequences to Satan for being wrong stated in the Book of Job. But it is implied that they're there, and they're deserved.

If we know God as He is, we are humbled, we're speechless, and we know we're unworthy. We despise ourselves for all that we falsely suppose about God and about the world and about us. God is not a programmed moral agent. What we suppose morality and justice to be are not sovereign gods who are over God. He is inscrutable, and He is free to act and to deal with us according to His holy and wise will. It's not our business to understand Him or His ways, but to know Him, trust Him, love Him and serve Him.

Satan knows that God will not deliberately cause Job to remain trusting in Him despite suffering. Satan knows that God honors the free will He endowed us with at creation. We have to assume that Job really could have cursed God. Satan can only try to predict what would happen, or what he hopes would happen. But God knows Job and how Job will respond. God had love and compassion for Job. God's decree of suffering is for some great purpose of His. Job looked for God to bring some future redemption evil, and so do we.

So, is God just? The happy ending tells us that He is. As the Book of Job has a good ending, so will this sin-laden, Satan-dominated world that God had created. The fact that God is sovereign, good, wise, and loving assures us that justice also will prevail. Faith is our response to God's revelation of Himself. Faith therefore is trusting God, holding to His perfections in spite of whatever life has for us. In fact, faith should cause us to rejoice, despite our circumstances, however severe they may be, because of how great and wonderful God is. We're here to glorify a totally glorious God.

The whole story of the Bible, indeed of all human history, is embedded in this book. Creation is stolen by Satan, who works evil in humanity deliberately so that God must condemn us. We don't know what's going on in the spiritual realm, and/or we don't care, so we [eg, Job's friends] substitute human speculation for truth. We do this out of pride – the very same attribute that characterizes and motivates Satan. Some among us, however [eg, Job], exercise faith in God despite all that Satan throws at us, despite our losses. And God is confident that those of us who trust Him will remain faithful and personally experience Him, the living and sovereign, eternal God. "God's strength is made perfect in our weakness." And God is glorified by our confidence in Him. At the end, we are vindicated, God's confidence in us is vindicated, Satan is dealt with (Hebrews 2:14 and elsewhere). And yes, subsequent revelation tells us God's justice will be vindicated.