

Another Look at the Book of Job

Job is one of the most wonderful books in the Bible. Most people rarely read it through because of all the seemingly boring discourse and instead read just the first couple and the last few chapters. Doing that is satisfying for most readers. But it's in all that discourse that we find evidence for a deeper understanding of the Book.

I freely admit that Job is a story that permits several valid interpretations, and we have looked at a couple of them in previous Sunday School lessons. Let's look at the book again because there's something more to be gained, something splendid to think about.*

At the outset of the story, we observe that God really likes Job. How about that! God not only loves us, he actually *likes* us! God is proud of Job. He is so pleased with Job that He calls him His "servant." God regards Job as highly as His other servants, Abraham, Moses and David. Notice in 1:8 that God says of Job, "There is none in all the earth like him." Hey, that kind of praise is due to God Himself! This is astonishing; God actually rejoices over Job. And so it's Job that Satan targets. Satan hates humanity, and he hates God. His hatred results in cruelty and deceit. And much suffering.

Job needs to be tested. God states (2:3) that Job's testing would be allowed, but it was never His intent to do that, and that Job didn't deserve such pain, for he was blameless, innocent. At the outset, we're told that all the speeches by Job's "friends" are in vain.

So, for some reason not revealed here (or anywhere for that matter), God allows this suffering, although it was undeserved. I think that this is a great mystery of life, a cosmic mystery that serves as the context for the Book, indeed, for the entire Bible. God is doing something super-special in His creation and He's not telling us what it is. (Not in this existence, anyway.) God allows evil, suffering, injustice and chaos. Now God is wise, good, just, and loving. So whatever His reason for allowing these, it must be exceedingly important and necessary.

Job's friends aren't really friendly. They're moralistic and self-righteous. Yes, they understand justice, but it's a standard, traditional understanding: You get what you deserve. So if Job is suffering, he deserved it! Their view of justice is true, but it's inadequate. The friends see the world as a dark place. One friend says even heaven is corrupt (15:15). Another says humans are like maggots (25:6). Nobody needs such friends as these. Poor Job.

Job comes close to cursing God. He says some very foolish things. He believes that God has messed up his life, as well as the whole world. He believes that God is no longer his friend (see the lament in Chapter 3). Job sees only chaos in the world, and God seems to be indifferent to it (Chapter 24). To Job, too, this world is a dark place. In repeated places, Job believes that God is angry at him 9:28-31; and 16:12,13, for example). Yet, Job knows that God is good. So, from Job's mouth we hear what nearly all commentators understand to be the key issue in the Book of Job: How does God govern His world? Maybe Job didn't deserve all this pain, but neither does Job really deserve God's faithful, committed love. Can we see God's awesome love for His servant between the lines of the story? What a wonderful Person God is.

Now, the main character in this book is God. And astonishingly, even after all his foolish talk, God still loves Job. God's, "Who is this . . . ?" (38:2) is not a quest for any answer, but a subtle, rhetorical way of admiring Job. God's so-called rebuke of Job is so gentle! God is certainly not humiliating Job as some wrongly read it. It's as if God were saying, "Good, you got thru it." And at the very end (42:7), God says that Job spoke rightly. Huh? Job certainly spoke foolishly, yet God's attitude toward Job, beginning to end, is unmitigated grace.

Then in Chapters 38 and 39, God reveals how He orders His world: In goodness. God has total and absolute control over everything, in detail. But more important (though it's subtle), in these chapters we see God's *attitude* toward His world: He rejoices over it. If the divine council had joy at Creation (38:7), God must have had even greater joy. Yes, there are episodes of predation and natural catastrophes (earthquakes, tornados, etc), but they are transient, intermittent, and localized and do not diminish the exceedingly great goodness of God's Creation.

There's one more character in this book we need to discuss. Leviathan. God devotes an entire chapter (41) to this wicked monster. It reads like some kind of dinosaur, but it's Satan who's in view. This chapter implies that God wasn't the source of Job's sufferings, Leviathan was. An evil being is at work in this world. God tolerates Leviathan for now, but eventually, in His time and in His way, God will dispose of him. Until then, Leviathan—although beautiful to behold—is proud, seeks autonomy from God, and is dangerously violent. But Leviathan doesn't diminish God's joy at His creation. God sees the evil in His world in detail, yet He has joy. God has great pleasure in His creation despite the malignant being that only God sees. That joy is uniquely revealed here in the Book of Job.

To us, as with the friends and with Job, this world is saturated with evil, injustice and pain. Exceedingly wicked entities are at work. But God has joy in His Creation. God knows the future, that is, how it will all end, and His great purposes will be realized.

* * *

The lengthy discussion of Leviathan at the end of the book, in the section dealing with God's response to Job's ordeal, suggests that Job's faith in God in spite of the painful circumstances is an essential component of God's defeat of evil in His creation. Job's ordeal is proleptic of that of the Son at His Incarnation and humiliation.

We exist to serve our Creator as He commissioned us, and to glorify Him by living out His righteousness that's revealed in His Word. Regardless what painful circumstances or trials confront us, we are here to bear them with trust in a good and purposeful God who has extended to us in Jesus a hope for a future blessed existence in His presence. That should fill our hearts with inexpressible joy.

God's creation is good. The life that He created is good. His will for us is good. God's justice is good. The future He's planned for us is good. We should treasure all of these; that is wisdom. Everything about God, His Person and His works, are exalted beyond anyone's ability to conceive. **"O Lord my God, you are very great; you are clothed with splendor and majesty . . . I will sing to the Lord all my life; I will sing praise to my God as long as I live. May my meditation be pleasing to him, as I rejoice in the Lord"** (Psalm 104:1,33,34).

Dear Reader: Can we adopt this Psalmist's worldview? God rejoices over us, over His Created world, and (I suspect) over His wise and good plans for His creatures and His world. Whatever pain comes to us in this existence must be understood in light of God's great, eternal purposes so that we can rejoice with God despite the suffering, and despite all the turmoil and the confusing lies that constitute our culture. Let's praise God continually, even when we're hurting. Jesus went to the cross with joy! May we too know the joy of the Lord and be blessed by it.

* This lesson largely derives from an insightful Evangelical Theological Society presentation given in November 2020 by Eric Ortlund, a faculty member at Oak Hill College. The audio file is available at WordMP3.com.