

**Study 14: Job and His Friends**

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**Introduction.**

Throughout our study of the Old Testament we have repeatedly seen the wonderful way in which God deals with humanity. In one sense His plan for our happiness can be considered one vast process of moral and religious education. And like any good teacher, God always speaks to His people in terms they can understand. He never demands more of them than they are capable of giving, something which explains God's apparent tolerance of the barbaric marriage customs and ways of warfare common to the people of ancient times.

A good teacher, however, is always anxious to stimulate his pupils to advance in their knowledge and their moral behavior. And so God was always calling His people to rise to ever greater heights of knowledge and love of Him and their neighbor. And much is expected of us, who have received the fullness of God's Revelation. How did Jesus put it? *"Much will be required of the person entrusted with much, and still more will be demanded of the person entrusted with more."* [Luke 12:48]

Pain and tragedy are, unhappily, a constant part of the human experience. The earlier books of the Bible tended to emphasize the communal solidarity of humanity. A person was blessed or cursed in so far as the tribe or nation as a whole was faithful or fell away from God. [See Exodus 20:5-6] Gradually, however, the concept of individual responsibility for one's actions came to be better understood. This was a key element of the message of the prophets, particularly Jeremiah and Ezekiel. [See Ezekiel 18:1-32] But both aspects, communal and individual, of the problem of reward and punishment were understood solely in terms of material blessings or misfortunes. Further, many tended to interpret the relationship between prosperity and virtue, or disaster and vice, with an almost mathematical rigidity.

In a most wonderful way the Book of Job challenges this too pat explanation of God's governance of creation. It also advances the frontiers of revelation – if only negatively – by introducing a figure who is clearly innocent and undeserving of punishment and who strongly denies the various traditional explanations of his so-called friends. The Book of Job doesn't just provide pat answers. No, it questions the accepted ideas of reward and punishment and breaks ground for a much more profound insight into the problem of suffering. Job was to lay the groundwork for the great Good News of the Gospels with their message of redemptive suffering, of victory in defeat.

The Book of Job also gives us a glimpse into what Israel thought about God's relationship with the pagan who lacks the benefit of revelation, the man to whom God has not yet spoken. From the very beginning Job shows us that all men wrestle with God, a mysterious, silent God who guides the universe in ways man does not understand. The pagan's God is one who does not explain himself, and this is the God we encounter in the Book of Job. The book, then, takes us into the ancient past, to the past before God spoke to Abraham, and in doing so asks as many questions of man as it does of God.

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**Reading. Now open your Bible and read:****Job 1-7; 38-42**

(I strongly recommend that you return to Job at some point and read the entire book.)

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**Behind the Words.**

*Author.* The extremely talented hand that produced the dramatic poem we call the Book of Job is unknown to us. Scriptural scholarship, however, has been able to discover something about him.

The first thing to understand is that there were almost certainly two Jobs. One was an ancient historical figure, probably from the Middle Bronze Age, the time of the patriarchs. He was undoubtedly a pagan and, based on his name, perhaps an Amorite or Edomite. Tradition has preserved the record of one with

this name who withstood a severe trial to his faith. When and where this man lived cannot be stated with any assurance.

We must clearly distinguish this Job of ancient tradition from the literary Job, the one described by the later author who actually wrote the Book of Job. The book is written as if the author witnessed the events described; however, he really knew Job only by word of mouth from the legends that had grown up around the earlier figure of pre-history. The speeches of Job, then, are actually presented in the author's words, just as the speeches of Hamlet are actually the words of Shakespeare. Keep in mind, though, this literary Job is no less historical than the Job of pre-history.

Our author was a native of Palestine, living sometime either during the exile or shortly after the return from exile. There is good reason to suppose the book was composed sometime in the 6<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> Century B.C. The author was well-traveled or well-educated (or both) since he was familiar with the religious traditions of the Egyptians and other peoples of the ancient Middle East. No other Old Testament author – with the possible exception of Ezekiel – appears as learned. He was a keen observer of the world around him and also a deeply compassionate man.

*Literary Structure.* The Book of Job is a dramatic poem in dialogue form. The main body of the work (Job 3-42:6) is preceded and followed by a prose narrative which is probably a great deal older. There is evidence that this Prologue (Job 1-2) and Epilogue (Job 42:7-16) represent a very ancient account of a traditional figure who lived well before 1,000 B.C. This person is quite likely identical with the Job mentioned in Ezekiel 14:14-20. Taken by itself this prose section give us a rather different solution to the problem of innocent suffering and was probably used by the author of the main work as a traditional introduction to his own highly untraditional and challenging poem.

*The problem.* Job, an upright and honest man, is suddenly visited by a host of misfortunes, to the extent that his very existence is threatened. Now personal catastrophes are nothing unusual, but what makes Job different is not so much the magnitude of his misfortune as the fact that it fell precisely upon him, a man well known for his justice and piety, one of God's most faithful servants. In some inexplicable way, injustice has been done and God Himself appears to be the one who caused it. Who else could it have been, since God brings all things to be? And since God is also all-just, the problem becomes, "Why?"

Now Job's three friends -- Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite (and later Elihu) – act as defenders of God. Three men, three names, three places of origin who all fuse into one since they come from the same spiritual background and profess the same "wisdom." As a result of this inherited wisdom we arrive at the following:

1. God is One, Creator of all, the all powerful, all just Lord of humanity.
2. Wisdom is the teacher of humanity and wisdom teaches that God rewards the good with good and the evil with evil, for God is just. This is a clear and simple teaching which understands and rationalizes God's essence and activity in moral and legal terms. It is also a teaching on salvation in that it claims to know the "way of life."
3. This simple theology, too reasonable to be true, makes God's defenders deaf to the cries of the innocent, because it could never accept that the omnipotent God has wrongfully harmed a just man. If Job is in the right, then God is in the wrong; and this is blasphemy.
4. Job's testimony is based on his clear conscience, and we know his testimony is true; although the conclusion that God is treating him unjustly is false. Just as strongly his three friends hold to the justice of God. The result: two immovable sides of the argument and humanly speaking there is no solution.

According to Job's friends, for God to have acted unjustly is unthinkable; He would then no longer be God. And so Job himself must be the cause of his own misfortune. But Job defends himself. His conscience is clear. And since he cannot receive justice from men, he dares the unthinkable and decides to address God Himself, calling on God to answer his charges, point for point.

The case for Job – the case really for every man – is now open for discussion and the court action can begin. It starts in heaven, continues on earth without resolution, and finally listens in dumb astonishment to the answer that comes from heaven.

**Some Key Passages.** In your Bible mark the following key passages from the Book of Job:

*Prologue: Job 1-3:1*

*Job's Lament: Job 3:2-26*

*The Great Debate: Job 4:1*

*God Intervenes: Job 38:1-42:6*

*Epilogue: Job 42:7-16*

**Highpoints of these Passages.**

***Job and the Hereafter (Job 3:13-23).*** The ancient Hebrews had little knowledge of man's fate after death. It is only in the latest books, written shortly before the time of Christ (e.g., Wisdom and 2 Maccabees) that we encounter a clearer picture of man's eternal destiny. To the author of Job, the only thing that awaited man after death was *Sheol*, probably best described as an imaginative picture of nothing. It was one vast grave in which Death, the great leveler, placed all of humanity, sooner or later. The only thing the author knew for certain was that death ended life as we know it; what lay beyond was hidden from his eyes. The answer to this eternal question would have to await God's fuller revelation of His plan for our happiness.

***The Prayer of Job (Job 6:1-10).*** This outpouring of anguish and boldness is perhaps a bit shocking to those accustomed to more conventional prayers. But we are told by the author that Job is a just man. And so, it is perhaps because of his intimate relationship with God that Job can speak so bluntly. These words of Job are in some ways reminiscent of the cry of Our Lord on the Cross: "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?"

***The Patience of Job (Job 7:1-21).*** Long before most people even open the Bible for the first time, they are familiar with Job as a model of patience during a time of suffering. The very phrase, "He has the patience of Job," has become a cliché. And so Job might surprise a lot of people if they actually read the sentiments Job expressed in chapter seven. In verse 20, for example, he actually seems to regard God ("Oh, Watcher of men") with hostility. Here we encounter the state of mind of a person who knows the living and personal God but not His grace and love. And beginning with verse 17 he seems to parody Psalm 8. But in all this we have a striking example of the grass roots realism of Holy Scripture. Job must first be tried as by fire before he can come forth purified. This outburst in chapter seven, then, is an expression of Job's torment. It is only after his confrontation with God that we meet the patient Job of Job 40:4-5.

***Job and God (Job 38-42).*** A number of important things occur in these climactic chapters. Job comes to recognize his own limitations, which gives him some access to the knowledge of God who is infinitely greater. Thus Job is humbled by the majesty and omnipotence of God. The solution to the problem of suffering, then, lies in the knowledge of not knowing, in learned ignorance. For Job, this operates not only in the knowledge of his intellect, but in his living meeting with God: "Now my eyes have seen you." [Job 42:5] The solution is therefore presented

by revelation and not by human logic. From a purely human standpoint, there is no answer to the suffering of the just man. Suffering can take on meaning only with reference to God who reveals Himself as always greater and above His human creature. It is all taken up into God's great plan for the universe.

God's meeting with Job is itself seen as an act of His gracious mercy, assuring Job that he is not abandoned. The author accomplishes his main purpose: the "friends" are rebuked; Job is commended; and though God's righteousness in ruling the world is firmly maintained, it is pointed out that man's misfortunes and sufferings cannot always be traced directly to his sins. Suffering does not need to bear the stamp of sin, and even in the midst of misery Job holds fast to the God of his faith. What God does with the suffering of the just man is made clear only in the epilogue: Job is called on to act as intercessor and intermediary for others. The man condemned by men is raised up by God's grace and restored. According to God's plan, suffering must not end in despair, but in glory together with God.

***God and the World of Nature (Job 39).*** Here we find a remarkably imaginative description of various members of the animal kingdom. Interestingly, most of the animals described are at least companionable or useful to man. Perhaps this represents an indirect correction of the excessively human-oriented judgment of God's activities by Job and his friends. Compare this chapter with what Our Lord says in Matthew 10:29.

***God and the War Horse (Job 39:19).*** This passage is among the most famous descriptions of the horse in all of literature. To the Hebrews the horse was the decisive weapon of war, and can be taken here as a symbol of the great power which man can wield but cannot create.

**Unity of the Two Testaments.** Some psychologists tell us that the human personality's most basic drive is the drive for meaning. By this they mean our deep-seated need to understand the significance of all that happens to us during the course of our lives. The Book of Job poses this problem of meaning in one of its most acute forms. How often have we heard someone cry, "Why did this happen to me?" or "What have I done to deserve this?" A better understanding of and answer to this problem did not come until God Himself became man and showed the world the real meaning of innocent suffering on the hill at Calvary. God offered humanity the opportunity to transform earthly, temporal defeats into eternal victories through union with the suffering Christ. See the following New Testament passages:

***Romans 5:1-21***

***James 5:7-11***

In terms of salvation history, the debate in the Book of Job prepares humanity to understanding the Servant of God who, although there was no sin in Him, went to His death for the sins of all and was raised to the right hand of the Father.

And let us not forget that we are to be doers of the Word. The lack of human sympathy on the part of Job's friends should repel us and therefore remind us never to become complacent in the presence of the suffering of others. Human feeling, abundantly clear from the life of Christ Himself, is perfectly compatible with holiness. Indeed, it is difficult to conceive of true sanctity without the beautifully human quality of compassion. Ask yourself:

- ✠ How do I react to the tragedies others experience in their lives?
- ✠ Do I visit the sick? The imprisoned? Do I personally help feed the hungry? Do I help the homeless?
- ✠ Do I attend wakes and funerals? Do I actually suffer with the bereaved or is it merely a social visit?

**Questions.** Reflect on the following questions offered for discussion:

1. What picture of God does the Book of Job present?
2. What picture of man does it present?
3. What is your reaction to the following statement? “The Book of Job is actually quite modern in both tone and story.”
4. How does the author resolve the problem of innocent suffering?
5. Read *Wisdom 1-5* and *2 Maccabees 12:43-46*. Do these passages add anything to the answer given by the author of Job?