

**WISDOM FOR LIVING:
(1) WISDOM AND SUFFERING**

Job

Jeffrey S. Carlson

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PROLOGUE

We can easily live in denial about pain and suffering in the world. Henny Youngman used to say, "I have a very fine doctor. If you can't afford the operation he touches up the x-rays."

On the other hand, Jesus said:

In this world you will have great trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

SCRIPTURE

There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil... {6} One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them. {7} The LORD said to Satan, "Where have you come from?" Satan answered the LORD, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." {8} The LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil." {9} Then Satan answered the LORD, "Does Job fear God for nothing? {10} Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. {11} But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face" (Job 1:1, 6-11 NRSV).

So begins one of the most provocative books in the Bible.

INTRODUCTION

The Bible is really a collection of smaller books compiled together into one majestic volume. The thirty-nine books written before the birth of Christ are known to Jews as the Hebrew Scriptures and to Christians as the Old Testament.

Some of the books of the Old Testament tell us the story of God's People. We refer to these as the Books of History. Some of the books tell us what to obey. We refer to these as the Books of the Law. Some of the books urge us to have faith. We refer to these as the Books of the Prophets. But some of the books invite us to think and we refer to these as the Books of Wisdom. They include: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon.

Derek Kidner tells us these books summon us:

“...to think hard as well as humbly; to keep our eyes open, to use our conscience and our common sense, and not to shirk the most disturbing questions.”¹

Wisdom literature was not unique to ancient Israel. It was a type of writing common in ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and other places as well. The purpose of Wisdom literature is not academic but practical. It tries to teach people how to make good choices regarding relationships, business practice, personal health and so on. Consequently, many of the wise sayings from differing nations sound alike. But the Wisdom Books of the Bible *are* unique in recognizing that true wisdom starts and ends with God. All of life is to be lived before the face of God and we need to learn how to apply faith in God to everyday reality.

Over the next few weeks we will be taking a closer look at the Wisdom Books of the Bible and how they can be a guide for daily living. We begin with the Book of Job.

1. QUESTIONS AND CHOICES

“The patience of Job” is a proverbial expression. It based on the story of a good man who, in spite of having to endure a host of afflictions from the Devil, maintained a calm and sure trust in the Lord and in the end was rewarded. The problem I have with this is, neither the expression, “The patience of Job,” nor the story I just described are found anywhere in the Bible. If you have actually read the Book of Job then you know the character of Job is anything but a model of patience. The character is more complicated and the story-line more provocative than the popular interpretation.

The book comes across as a drama with a short introduction, a short conclusion, and series of well crafted poems in between. It seems to address the issue of God and human suffering but raises more questions than it answers. Ironically, this apparent shortcoming is one of the great strengths of the book. There is a relationship between the questions we ask and the choices we make. The Book of Job, among other things, teaches us to ask the right questions.

2. THE WRONG QUESTION: WHY DO I SUFFER?

The introduction describes the setting for the drama. Job was a wealthy and faithful man who honored God. However, unknown to Job, in a kind of celestial court, Satan (literally “the adversary”) complains to God that Job only honors God because of all the good things he gets from God. Take away the good things and he will curse God. The Adversary then receives permission to test his claim and before long Job is a childless and sickly pauper. Even so, Job seems to hold on to a traditional faith accepting suffering as inevitable and patiently enduring it. But all of this changes after his wife, three so-called friends and a strange young man speak to him. All five assume the chief question is, “Why is Job suffering?” How they answer the

¹Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes*, p. 11.

question determines what kind of advice they give to Job.

The wife thinks Job is suffering because there is something wrong with God. So she tells her husband, "Curse God, and die" (2:9) - not exactly the kind of thing you would expect to see on a Hallmark sympathy card. Job thinks this idea is foolish.

Then along come the three friends: Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. As a side note, let me point out that of the three, Bildad is the most famous. Whereas the third shortest person in the Bible is Zacchaeus since he was "a wee little man" and the second shortest person in the Bible is Knee High Miah (Nehemiah) since he was only "knee high," the shortest person in the Bible is Bildad since Scripture describes him as "Bildad the Shoe Height" (Shuhite; 2:11)!

Anyway, the three friends think Job is suffering because Job has committed some terrible sin and God is punishing him for it. Their advice is for Job to confess and repent and he'll feel better. But Job does not agree with their assessment and maintains his integrity.

Then along comes young Elihu who says some things similar to the three friends but the bottom line for Elihu is that the reason Job is suffering is because God wants to teach him something. But Job makes no answer since it is clear from the context that Job stopped listening long before Elihu finished his lengthy speech. One gets the impression that even God fell asleep!

God finally speaks to Job out of a whirlwind. Job answers God's questions in humility and new-found assurance. God does not answer Job's questions but does reject the answers of the five companions.

God is not the author of evil as the wife assumed. The prophet Jeremiah has said, "for [God] does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone" (Lam 3:33 NRSV), an affirmation I have clung to more than once in my life.

The three friends mistakenly believed that suffering is always the result of wrongdoing. The disciples of Jesus held this view at first. In the ninth chapter of John we read how Jesus and his disciples came a cross a man who was born blind. The disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus said, "Neither one."

Elihu's belief that we can learn from our suffering is not entirely false. But to make it the chief purpose is to trivialize the suffering. Furthermore it is often unclear what, if anything, we are to learn from suffering. A missionary told a church group about the time she almost died from malaria. A pious gentleman asked, "And what did you learn from this experience?" She replied, "I hate mosquitoes!"

All of Job's companions ask the wrong question. Wrong questions yield unhelpful answers that in turn lead to bad choices. If you believe God is evil then sooner or later you will choose death over life. If you believe God is punishing you then you will choose law over grace. If

you believe pain is the “school of hard knocks” then you will never graduate and you may even make up stories to tell others what you think God is teaching you.

3. THE PRACTICAL QUESTION: HOW DO I SUFFER?

In contrast, the most practical question that comes out of the Book of Job is not, “Why do I suffer?” but “How do I suffer?” “What am I to do when I am suffering?”

The three stages Job goes through would seem to supply the answers. There is the trust and acceptance of God’s will in chapters 1 and 2. There is the distressed spirit and angry interrogation of God that is found in chapters 3 through 41. Then there is the discovery of a redemptive purpose in chapter 42 as Job prays for the very friends that had turned on him and they are restored to God. Job’s subsequent reversal of fortune is not a reward for being “a good boy” but an affirmation of grace for participating in God’s work of seeking and saving the lost.

So here is the crux of the matter. Whatever else suffering may be, it is an invitation to help others. Job raises the question. Jesus shows the answer. From the cross he prayed for those who hurt him, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do (Lk 23:34).

CONCLUSION

Job never did receive the answers to his specific questions about pain and suffering. Instead he was given the assurance of God's presence and the vision of a future where pain and death, sin and suffering are no more. In an assertion that would carry more import than he originally intended, Job declares:

I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth;
and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God
(19:25-26 NRSV).

We may not know the answers to our questions, but we can know God, his power and his love. And there is something we can take on faith as being completely true:

"Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:38-39 NRSV).