

## Sovereign and Graceful

While the book of Job is considered wisdom literature, it is in stark contrast to the book of Proverbs with its collection of short wisdom sayings. Job is a thorough examination of why the righteous Believer may suffer. Written in poetic parallelism (laments, psalms and hymns), translating and understanding the text has been difficult because of its unusual grammatical constructions and large number of rare words.

Given the challenges of this book, one approach of Bible study is to summarize the various speeches into short and easy to understand dialogs. With this overview, one could gain a better sense as to what is taking place and provide a framework from which a deeper study can take place.

This short study attempts to look at the subject of suffering through the study of Job. While this author has included some of his interpretations of the text, take the time to read and study the book of Job; discover personally what God would like you to know about suffering and sovereignty.

Job had lost his family, wealth and health, and his wife gave him no support, encouraging him to forget his integrity and curse God. Accompanied by his friends Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, who had been sitting in silence with him for the past week, Job begins his dialog just as a bystander Elihu sits in.

### The first set of conversation - insinuations

Job's lament: I wish I'd never been born or died at birth (Job 3).

Eliphaz rebukes and hints that Job is a sinner resenting God's discipline: Suffering is from sin. Repent and welcome God's discipline as a blessing. The logic: a) all suffering is punishment for sin, b) Job is suffering, c) therefore Job is a sinner. (Job 4-5)

Job's first reply to Eliphaz: God grant my wish to die! I'm disappointed in the lack of help and sympathy from my friends. What evidence do you have that I sinned? How God have I sinned? Why am I suffering so? (Job 6-7)

Bildad accuses Job of doubting God's justice: Complaining means that you are accusing God of injustice. God punishes the wicked and blesses the faithful. If you are righteous, God will restore you otherwise repent! (Job 8)

Job's first reply to Bildad: How can a man plead with God? I know God is all powerful and all wise. Who can mediate and arbitrate my case? God - do not condemn me. Why are You against me? I am innocent; what are Your charges against me? Let me die. (Job 9-10)

Zophar rudely rebukes Job: Are you boasting of your innocence? I hope God answers you and gives you an insight of true wisdom. Repent and be restored. (Job 11)

Job's first reply to Zophar: All you have said is common knowledge of God. You are not helping me I don't want to waste my time debating my case before you three, you distort the facts with lies that I'm a sinner! I want to argue my case before God. Hear me out; listen to my case. I long for God's hearing but I despair. Lord let me die and release me from this life. (Job 12, 13, 14)

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### The second set of conversation – accusations

Eliphaz's lambasts Job with his second response: Your irreverence adds to your sin! You are guilty! Let me remind you that the wicked man suffers torment. (Job 15)

Job's second response to Eliphaz: You are all miserable friends of long winded speech and of little help. While I despair, there must be an advocate for me in heaven. The righteous would be appalled by you my friends. Try, my "wise" friends, to find my sin. My situation is desperate. My only hope is the grave. (Job 16-17)

An indignant Bildad berates Job in his second response: Why do you insult us? Wicked people like yourself are weakened, diseased, forgotten, childless and banished. (Job 18)

Job's second response to Bildad bemoans the animosity of his accusers, yet he rises with a new level of spiritual confidence: Why do you keep attacking me? If I have sinned, it is my problem. I've been wronged by God. People forsake me, friends ridicule me and my health continues to decline. Record my petition of innocence. With my death, I will see God who will testify of my innocence. But if you persist in harassing an innocent, you will be a recipient of God's wrath! (Job 19)

Disturbed by Job's insults, Zophar unleashes his anger in his second response: I will meet your insults with wisdom. While the wicked may be blessed, their prosperity will be brief and God wrath will take away their riches in the end. (Job 20)

Job's second response to Zophar: Ah if my counselors would only listen and not condemn me! If my complaints are towards God, why can't I be impatient? If you are appalled by the trouble and horrible end of the wicked, why don't you show concern for me a sinner? And the wicked may prosper to the end of their lives. Yet wealth and health are not always the means to judge one's character. Your counsel is nonsense! (Job 21)

### The third set of conversation – accusations of specific sins

Eliphaz's third response is abrupt and prosecutorial: God's justice is based on righteousness! God would never rebuke a righteous person. You have sinned. You have taken clothing used as security, refused to give water and food to people in need and abused widows and orphans. Repent and submit to God! (Job 22)

Job's third response is towards Eliphaz's indictments: If God can be found, I could plead my case. I am innocent. Yet while I am terrified to come before Him, God is seemingly indifferent towards sinners such as thieves, oppressors, and criminals who work at night. Sinners will be judged but I don't understand why they should prosper at all. (Job 23-24)

Bildad's third lecture contrasts the majesty of God to the insignificance and iniquity of men: God is great and you cannot question God. Man is small and sinful; Job you have no hope of being righteous and pure. (Job 25)

Job's third response to Bildad is the longest of all responses: Bildad, your efforts of helping me has been futile. All you can tell me is what happens to the wicked and about man's iniquity. Your wisdom is worthless! Moreover, I know a lot more about God's majesty than you! We see God's awesome power over nature, but this is just a glimpse of what He does. How can you fully understand His power? (Job 26)

My friends, your judgment of me is wrong I am innocent and being unjustly treated. I do not have the hopelessness of the wicked who only call upon God when in distress and will experience ultimate punishment for their sins. (Job 27)

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Despite man's skills of seeking treasure, he cannot find unaided the greatest treasure of all - wisdom. God told man that the essence of wisdom is to fear the Lord. While I fear the Lord and reject evil, your "wisdom" is evidence that you do not! (Job 28)

Lord, I wish for my former life when you watched over and blessed me, because I helped the needy, administered justice and counseled others. But now I am mocked by the young and held in contempt by the homeless. Despite showing sympathy and grieving with those in emotional distress and physical pain in my former life, none have reciprocated in my misery (Job 29-30)

Lord, I am innocent. If guilty, then punish me. I have not lusted, lied, committed adultery, failed to help my slaves or poor or needy, trusted in my wealth, practiced idolotry, treat my enemies unfairly, been stingy or unfair to my farm workers. I wish God that you will hear me. (Job 31)

### The bystander Elihu speaks

After failing to convince Job to deny his innocence or repent of his sin, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar fall silent. Job, unconvinced that his suffering was because of sin and silencing his friends, could not induce God to speak. Elihu, a young man listening, breaks the stalemate and responds angrily in four speeches.

First speech: God speaks through dreams and pain.

I have not spoken in deference to you who are wiser; however, I am compelled to speak. I disagree with all of you. Job, you say that you are innocent and that God is being unfair, but it is wrong to complain when God does not answer you. God does speak in a variety of ways! Dreams may be intended to turn people from wrongdoing or pride. Illness or pain may remind a person of a proper attitude or may result in angelic intercession and restore a right relationship with God. (Job 32-33)

Second speech: God is just.

Elihu speaking to the four men: God cannot do evil or wrong! God gives man what he deserves! If God were unjust, how could he govern the world? God sees everything that everyone does; He does not need to investigate anything! (Job 34:1-15)

Elihu speaking to Job: How is it that you can speak to God in the manner that you do? You declare your innocence, yet you demand God to show you your sin so that you would stop sinning. How can you tell God what to do? God is sovereign; He cannot stoop to man's terms. (Job 34:16-37)

Third speech: God is sovereign.

Elihu continues speaking to Job: How is it that you seek vindication by asserting your innocence while simultaneously stating that your innocence is of no value before God? God is higher than man! God is not affected by man; a person's wickedness or righteousness only affects the person. (Job 35)

Fourth speech: God is awesome.

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Elihu continues: I am confident of my insights. God deals justly with both the wicked and righteous. God does not allow the wicked to live, and He restores the righteous who are afflicted. God uses suffering to lead people to repent of pride. The righteous will listen, obey and serve Him. The wicked will not and die. Job, in your longing of the past, be sure that your heart is not turned from God. (Job 36:1-21)

God is an awesome power. His ways and His work go beyond comprehension. With the weather, He can both govern and bless the people. No one knows how God can guide the clouds or cause lightening. If you Job cannot understand the observable acts of God, how can you draw up a legal case before God? Revere our Lord. Toss aside your conceit and pride. Fear God because of His supremacy and mankind's inferiority. (Job 36:22-33; 37)

### God speaks

First speech: God exposes Job's limits in knowledge.

From a storm that has come about Job and his friends, God speaks to Job: Why do you ask me to explain myself? What do you know? Can you answer my questions about my creation and the physical world? Do you know the answers to my questions about the animal world? I have asked you over 70 questions. Declare, if you know all this! (Job 38-39)

Second speech: God exposes Job's limits in power.

God continues to speak to Job: You accuse Me of contending with you, but how could you indict your God? The accuser should answer My questions! Would you discredit My justice? Would you condemn Me to justify yourself? Without My power to rule the world and authority to judge justly, how can you be qualified to make your own case? Can you fulfill the responsibility of judging the wicked? (Job 40:1-14)

Like you, the behemoth is a fellow creature; can you tame it? Or the vicious leviathan; can you catch it? Can you subdue these monsters? Can you maintain order in My universe? Can you control or conquer evil? (Job 40:15-24; 41)

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The book of Job is considered by scholars a masterpiece of literary work not only for its literary structure but for its approach of examining the problem of suffering. And the book of Job examines the attitudes of both the sufferer and his friends.

While Job's initial response to affliction was proper (Job 1:21-22; 2:10), he defended himself against all wrongdoing while accusing God of doing wrong (Job 6:4; 9:17; 13:27; 16:12; 19:11). In the end, as God challenged him (Job 38, 39, 40, 41), Job gained a greater insight into the character of God: His creative power, genius, providential care, love, greatness and sovereignty.

Challenged with God's wonders of nature, Job admitted his own finiteness (Job 40:3-5).

Challenged with his inadequacy to conquer and control evil, Job recognized God's sovereignty and his own sin of pride (Job 42:1-6). Job realized his unworthiness and that this omnipotent God was not obligated to man.

It is worthwhile to note that God never justified why evil exists in this world. Realizing that God controls evil and suffering, Job was concerned with how he could be righteous before Him, and how he could fellowship with Him.

When the attitudes of Job's three counselors are examined, they failed as friends in several ways:

They did not listen to his complaints and concerns.

They did not express any sympathy.

They did not pray for him.

They prosecuted Job with unsubstantiated charges and poor theology.

For their sins, God requires a large sacrifice from Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar! In addition, Job is asked to be their mediator to pray on their behalf (Job 42:8-9)!

### References:

1. Archer GL, *The Book of Job: God's Answer to the Problem of Understanding Suffering*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker (1982).
2. Walvoord JF, Zuck RB, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, Wheaton, IL: Victor Books (1978).