

JOB

God's Love and Man's Suffering

Introduction – Chapters 1-2

Introduction. Job is considered a literary masterpiece in wisdom literature. It has been called the greatest work of poetry in ancient and modern times. The author has been ranked with Homer, Dante and Shakespeare. Yet the book is not an easy or swift read. The author's words have to be pondered as he deals with the great mystery of God's love and human suffering. While the writing is seen as one person's attempt to deal with the perennial question of why an all-good and all-loving God allows a good and faithful person to suffer, other issues are also raised in the book.

The book of Job questions the traditional retribution doctrine outlined in the book of Deuteronomy and accepted by the prophets and even by the authors of Proverbs, namely, that material blessings are a sign of a virtuous life, and poverty and suffering are a sign of a sinful life. This belief continued to be prevalent even at the time of Jesus. In John 9, which tells about the healing of a man born blind, the disciples ask: "*Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?*" Jesus answered: "*Neither he nor his parents sinned...*" (vv 2-3). Job's so-called comforters assume that his suffering is brought on by his sins, whether or not he knows it, and for that, he needs to repent. In 11:6, Zophar says: "*It is for sin that God calls you to account.*" In the final chapter of the book, God tells Job's friends "that they had not spoken rightly about him" (42:7). They are wrong in believing that success and happiness are rewards for righteous living and equally wrong in believing that failure and grief are punishments for unfaithfulness.

A third issue raised concerns the right of humans to question God about suffering and to expect an answer. When God finally speaks (ch38), he gives Job a non-answer. He tells Job that just as there is much in nature that he does not understand, so there is much in human experience that is beyond him. Many centuries later, Paul grapples with his own people's rejection of Jesus, saying: "*Who has known the mind of the Lord or who can be his counselor?*" (Rom 11:34).

The book raises another question: will humans be loyal to God if there are no rewards and punishments—or do they only do good in order to be rewarded? To put it another way: is it possible to

continue to believe in God's goodness when we are in the depths of suffering and experiencing no consolation?

Historical book or not? We are free to believe that Job was a real historical person, but most scholars today believe that Job was used by the author to personify the suffering just man. Also, while scholars aren't sure when the book was written, many think it was during the post-exilic period. Some consider that the author could be writing about his own experiences of suffering and his refusal to believe that God was punishing him for some sin.

Drama with five scenes

Job opens with a narrative introduction or prologue, followed by a series of poetic dialogues and a narrative epilogue. The book is subdivided into five sections or scenes.

Scene 1 (Chapters 1-2). The prose dialogue has five scenes alternating between heaven and earth. In the heavenly scenes, God and Satan are engaged in a dialogue about Job. Satan says that Job is only loyal to God because God has been so good to him. God allows Satan to test Job to see if Job will remain loyal to God even when bad things happen to him. Despite the terrible suffering inflicted on Job by Satan, Job refuses to follow his wife's advice to "*curse God and die*" (2:9). Then three of Job's "friends" come to comfort him.

Scene 2 (Chapters 3-31). This long section comprises three series of conversations between Job and his three "friends" concerning divine justice as it relates to Job's suffering. Job's friends, holding tightly to the traditional belief of retribution on earth, conclude that Job is suffering because he has sinned. Job challenges this presupposition and insists that he is innocent. He seeks to comprehend why a just God would allow him, a good man, to suffer so much. Job repeatedly bangs his head against the mystery of divine justice. His tortured soul matches his suffering body. At the end of the series of conversations, Job demands that God appear and defend himself if he is a just God.

Scene 3 (Chapters 32-37). Suddenly, an upstart called Elihu enters the story. He challenges both Job and his friends, and demands that they submit to the God who controls all events.

Scene 4 (Chapters 38-41). God breaks his silence and begins to speak. He tells Job that he is in no position to understand the workings of God. Finally, Job gets it and submits twice. He says: *“Behold, I am of little account; what can I answer you? I will put my hand over my mouth”* (40:4). Then later in 42:6, he says: *“I disown what I have said, and repent in dust and ashes.”*

Scene 5 (Chapter 42:7-16). The final scene gives us a happy ending. Job’s friends are told that they have misspoken. God restores to Job all his material blessings and gives him twice as much as he had previously owned.

COMMENTARY

Opening scene: Conversation between God and Satan resulting in Job’s trials

CHAPTER 1: Job’s blessings, piety and his first trial

“In the land of Uz, there was a blameless and upright man named Job, who feared God and avoided evil.” (v.1)

“The Lord said to Satan, ‘Have you noticed my servant Job, and that there is no one on earth like him, blameless and upright, fearing God and avoiding evil?’ But Satan answered: ‘If you put forth your hand and touch anything he has, surely he will blaspheme you to your face....’” (vv 8-11)

Job is introduced to us as a rich man, renowned for his piety. He is blameless, upright and fears God, i.e., respects God. Job is portrayed as a pretty perfect fellow.

God is imaged as a king seated on his throne, receiving reports from his advisors. Among them is “Satan” whom Scripture scholar Barbara Reid, O.P., considers not the devil “but rather a kind of prosecutor whose job is to bring wrongdoers to justice.” Of course, Job is not guilty of any wrongdoing, but Satan has been watching. When God brags about how good and faithful Job is, Satan responds: “It’s easy for him to be good. After all you have greatly blessed him. Take away his blessings

and he will most likely curse you. His piety will quickly give way to blasphemy.” God bets that Job will continue to be faithful even without his blessings. So Satan is given permission to “touch” Job as long as he doesn’t harm him.

Verses 13-22—First trial. Now the drama switches locations from heaven to earth. Forces of destruction are let loose upon Job’s world, decimating first his livestock, then his slaves, and finally his children. Job’s cosmos is reduced to chaos. Natural and human forces do the work of destruction. Job curses God, as Satan hoped he would. But then Job prostrates himself upon the ground and utters his now famous words: *“Naked I came forth from my mother’s womb and naked shall I go back. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord”* (v.21).

Job accepts that all is gift from God. He believes that if his material blessings and great family have been a reward for his goodness, they only belong first to God. God, for his own reasons, has chosen to take back his blessings, and that seems to be okay with Job. God has a perfect right to do this and it in no way cancels out Job’s duty to continue to worship and praise God.

In her commentary, Barbara Reid, O.P., cautions us about offering Job’s response in the face of suffering as the only model for handling adversity. She writes: *“The suffering of the poor, by oppressive systems, should not simply be accepted with compliance. As the story of Job unfolds, we will see him fight back more against the unjust suffering he is experiencing”* (Daily Homily commentaries, Oct. 2, 2006).

CHAPTER 2: Job’s second trial

The scene moves back to the heavenly court where God is in session. God again brags to Satan about Job’s faithfulness. Unfazed, Satan challenges God to touch Job’s bone and flesh, convinced that Job will surely curse God. Once again, God says: *“He is in your power; only spare his life”* (v.6).

But even Satan’s attack on Job’s person does not immediately break down Job’s patience, despite tauntings from his wife. Job responds: *“We accept good things from God; and should we not accept evil?”* (v.10). Then the author adds: *“Through all this, Job said nothing sinful”* (v.10).

Before we are introduced to Job's friends, it is important to refer back to 2:3 where God says to Satan: "*You incited me against Job without cause.*" As we go forward, it is important to remember that statement about Job's innocence. Job does not know why he is being inflicted with great suffering, but we, the audience, do. We know God is testing Job to see if he will remain faithful to him in the midst of great suffering.

Verses 11-13—Job's friends. In the concluding verses of chapter 2, we are introduced to Job's friends Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. We might say that this is Job's friends' best hour. It seems each one travelled a long distance to be with their suffering friend. They came to comfort him (v.1). When they see how badly he looks, they perform the traditional mourning rites of weeping aloud, tearing their garments and placing dust on their heads. They sit with him on the ground for seven days and seven nights, never speaking a word (v.13). But once the friends open their mouths, they only add to his suffering.

Pause: At a time of sadness and grief, what do you want your friends to do and say, and what *don't* you want them to do and say?