

Session #7

Job: Hope and Challenge in the Midst of Suffering

Background and Introduction

The book of Job follows this general outline:

Prolouge (1-2)
Job's lament (3)
Job's dialogue with his friends (4-27)
Hymn in praise of wisdom (28)
Job's lament (29-31)
Elihus's intervention (32-37)
Speeches of the Lord (38-42:6)
Epilogue (42:7-:17)¹

The exact dating of the book of Job is extremely difficult to determine. So is it's authorship. There are even some translation difficulties because parts of it may make use of Aramaic phrases which don't translate easily into Hebrew. There is even the possibility that some of the language of the book reflects a largely lost ancient dialect. This means there is enough uncertainty about the text at certain points, and enough variation among the oldest existing translations of this book, to cause some difficulty in sorting out the meaning of the text.²

Various authorities have proposed a range of dates for the composition of this book. Some ancient Rabbis suggested it was written as early as the 19th century BC. The theologians of the early Church suggested it was written at the time of Solomon's reign. Many modern commentators suggest that it was written around the 5th or 4th century BC. This was the period when the Jewish people, have returned from their exile in Babylon, were living in the Promised Land under Persian authority. This book would have spoken powerfully about to people who had experienced such a period of loss and suffering.³

It is interesting to note that Job is not presented as being ethnically Jewish, yet this is a book centered on the God of Israel.⁴ St. John Chrysostom (347-407 AD) pointed out that Job is among those biblical figures; like the priest Melchezidek in Genesis, the Ninevites in the book of Jonah, and the Roman centurion Cornelius in the book of Acts, who despite have at most a slim connection to the people of Israel seem to be loyal and faithful to the Lord of Israel.⁵ I would point out that that pagan rulers who were lied to by

¹ Jose Maria Casciaro, ed., *The Navarre Bible: Wisdom Books* (Dublin, Ireland: Four Courts Press, 2004), 20.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid, 23.

⁴ Patrick Henry Reardon, *The Trial of Job* (Ben Lomond, CA,: Conciliar Press, 2005), 13-14.

⁵ Philip Schaff, ed., *St. Chrysostom: Homilies on Acts and Romans*, First Series, vol. XI *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 363.

Abraham concerning his relationship to Sarah (Genesis 12:10-:20 and 20:1-:18) seem to follow this same pattern. So in Job we see someone who is not a physical descendent of Abraham, but whose trust is in the God of Abraham.

Content and Message of the Book of Job

The central theme of the book of Job seems to be a call to place our trust and faith in God no matter what circumstances we find ourselves:

And 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 the LORD and said, "Is it for nothing that Job is God-fearing? Have you not surrounded him and his family and all that he has with your protection? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his livestock are spread over the land. But now put forth your hand and touch anything that he has, and surely he will blaspheme you to your face." (Job 1:8-:11)

As the story proceeds all of this is taken from Job. Job loses his children, his servants are killed, and his property is stolen and destroyed. (Job 1:13-:22) Then he is cursed with an illness that caused painful and disfiguring sores. (Job 2:7-:8) He was left with a wife (Job 2:9-:10) and friends (Job 3-28) whose advice to him was foolish enough that, putting aside the issue of their well being, Job might have been better off if they had been taken from him too. The bulk of this book is verse after verse, chapter after chapter, of suffering and incomprehension. So this story very dramatically points us towards the fact that real faith in God is not based on our success, our comfort, or our good fortune. Job powerfully grasps this truth. We see hints of his human weakness and foolishness throughout the book, but in many ways he is defined by the greatness seen in this passage:

Then Job began to tear his cloak and cut off his hair. He cast himself prostrate upon the ground, and said, "Naked I came forth from my mother's womb, and naked shall I go back again. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD!" In all this Job did not sin, nor did he say anything disrespectful of God. (Job 1:20-:22)

In many ways the book and this class could end here and we would have learned the basics of what we're meant to discover by reading Job.

The Words of Job and his Friends

Chapters four through twenty-eight were only given to you as supplemental reading because there is only limited value in reading the words of Job's friends. Fr. Reardon even goes as far as to say that as the book goes on Job's friends get dumber, as all they do is to repeat already unhelpful arguments.⁶

⁶ Patrick Henry Reardon, *The Trial of Job*, 59-60.

Job himself shows some variation when it comes to the wisdom he displays. In Chapter thirty-one he firmly and repeatedly affirms his absolute innocence. He seems to be trying to, in Fr. Reardon's words, "litigate against God." Later in the book, as Job comes to his senses, he "will explicitly retract his defense."⁷ We see an example of Job's "litigation" as he says "Let God weigh me in the scales of justice; thus will he know my innocence!" (Job 31:6)

The Words of God

When God appears he does not even bother to answer Job's questions. He does not explain what has taken place. The call to trust in and accept the will of the Lord is not meant to be dependent on us being given this specific information.⁸

We see this is in some of the words of the Lord we are given in Job 38, 39, and the opening verses of chapter 40:

Then the LORD addressed Job out of the storm and said: Who is this that obscures divine plans with words of ignorance? Gird up your loins now, like a man; I will question you, and you tell me the answers! Where were you when I founded the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its size; do you know? Who stretched out the measuring line for it? Into what were its pedestals sunk, and who laid the cornerstone, while the morning stars sang in chorus and all the sons of God shouted for joy? And who shut within doors the sea, when it burst forth from the womb; when I made the clouds its garment and thick darkness its swaddling bands? When I set limits for it and fastened the bar of its door, and said: Thus far shall you come but no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stilled! Have you ever in your lifetime commanded the morning and shown the dawn its place, for taking hold of the ends of the earth, till the wicked are shaken from its surface? The earth is changed as is clay by the seal, and dyed as though it were a garment; but from the wicked the light is withheld, and the arm of pride is shattered. Have you entered into the sources of the sea, or walked about in the depths of the abyss? Have the gates of death been shown to you, or have you seen the gates of darkness? Have you comprehended the breadth of the earth? Tell me, if you know all: which is the way to the dwelling place of light, and where is the abode of darkness, that you may take them to their boundaries and set them on their homeward paths? You know, because you were born before them, and the number of your years is great! Have you entered the storehouse of the snow, and seen the treasury of the hail which I have reserved for times of stress, for the days of war and of battle? Which way to the parting of the winds, whence the east wind spreads over the earth? Who has laid out a channel for the downpour and for the thunderstorm a path, to bring rain to no man's land, the unpeopled wilderness; to enrich the waste and desolate ground till the desert blooms with verdure? Has the rain a father; or who has begotten the drops of dew? Out of whose womb comes the ice, and who gives the hoarfrost its birth in the skies, when the waters lie covered as though with stone that holds captive the surface of the deep? Have you fitted a curb to the Pleiades, or loosened the bonds of Orion? Can you bring forth the

⁷ Ibid, 81-82.

⁸ Ibid, 96.

Mazzaroth in their season, or guide the Bear with its train? (These last lines refer several different constellations and show us God's control and dominion over the stars of the sky) Do you know the ordinances of the heavens; can you put into effect their plan on the earth? Can you raise your voice among the clouds, or veil yourself in the waters of the storm? Can you send forth the lightnings on their way, or will they say to you, "Here we are"? Job 38:1-:35

Do you know about the birth of the mountain goats, watch for the birth pangs of the hinds, Number the months that they must fulfill, and fix the time of their bringing forth? Job 39:1-:2

Do you give the horse his strength, and endow his neck with splendor? Do you make the steed to quiver while his thunderous snorting spreads terror? Job 39:19-:20

The LORD then said to Job: Will we have arguing with the Almighty by the critic? Let him who would correct God give answer! Job 40:1-:2

In other words; you did not make the world, you do not control the world, you do not understand the world. You do not have the power, or the insight, or the understanding that would give the right to question what I do.

Job shows remarkable trust and faith as he receives the final message of the Lord. He accepts the limitations of his words and wisdom, and accepts the intervention of God. He reacts how someone who has been rebuked by the Lord should react:

Then Job answered the LORD and said: Behold, I am of little account; what can I answer you? I put my hand over my mouth. Though I have spoken once, I will not do so again; though twice, I will do so no more. (Job 40:3-:5)

He lets go of any idea of making a case before the Lord, and repents as he acknowledges his weakness:

Then Job answered the LORD and said: I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be hindered. I have dealt with great things that I do not understand; things too wonderful for me, which I cannot know. I had heard of you by word of mouth, but now my eye has seen you. Therefore I disown what I have said, and repent in dust and ashes. (Job 42:1-:6)

This gives us the image of how the weak and the humble are meant to react to God's power and majesty.

Thoughts on the Implications of this Book

This book leads to some harsh but comforting conclusions. We can find comfort in recognizing that this book means that God is in control no matter what situation someone finds themselves in; with a gun to their head, watching their children starve to death, watching a spouse waste away in a hospital bed. It also means that we have to face the

harsh reality that even giving God control of your live does not mean you will be saved from situations like these.

This means that we trust God even we have no idea what he's doing, because we don't have anywhere else to go. We can't see how trusting God is going to turn out but we know there's no hope in trusting in ourselves, in the world, or in the Devil (which seems to cover all the other options that are available). So we trust in God despite the complete lack of assurance that this is going to be easy or that it will go smoothly.

To accept the book of Job we need to recognize that anything with God is better than anything else without him. Any set of circumstances where we hang on to our faith in him is better than any circumstances we could face without him. The worst situation we can imagine, if God is there with us, is better than the best situation we can imagine without him.

The Book of Job seems to clearly show that God does not give us a neat answer when it comes to why there is suffering. There is no complete and easy explanation. If you want a full explanation or an easy answer when it comes to the question of suffering, then find a different religion because Christianity isn't for you.

This means that we have to be willing to stand with God and die, rather than live any other way.

Suffering and the Cross of Christ

No discussion of human suffering and God's love would be complete without a discussion of the cross of Jesus Christ. We have an insight into God's love for us in the midst of suffering that the Old Testament Jews could not have had. God has become man and physically suffered. God has experienced death. God has experienced betrayal. God has wept. (John 11:35)

This means that no matter what type of a lack of understanding we have when it comes to why God allows suffering we can know that is not because of a lack of love for us. For our sake God the Son suffered and died. He became one with us in experiencing alienation, in experiencing loss, and in experiencing death. God has chosen to save us from these things not by drawing us out of them, but by uniting himself to us as we experience them. Why things are done this way is beyond our ability to full understand, but our lack of insight into this method should not cause us to lose sight of the love God has shown in doing things this way.

During the time of the Old Testament God's people knew the reality of his faithfulness and love. They knew this was true even in the worst of circumstances. The Book of Job powerfully shows us that this is the case. But they did not fully know how this faithfulness and love was going to be shown in the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. We do. So all the more we have the responsibility to recognize that God's love is powerful, real, and active no matter what our circumstances might be. We also have been

given a much fuller explanation of the reality of eternal life. St. Paul has gone as far as to say “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed for us.” (Romans 8:18)

We can know that God offers us a glory greater than any suffering we could ever have to face in this world, and that even while we are in this world we can be assured that through Christ’s suffering and death God’s love for us has been shown to be absolute and complete. This promise of glory, and the demonstration of God’s love in the cross of Christ, does not take away our sufferings or make them an easy thing to face. When St. Paul tells us not to “grieve as others do who have no hope” (1 Thessalonians 4:13) he is not telling us not to grieve, he is telling us that Christian hope should change how we grieve.

On the one hand I believe that a very small handful of times I’ve met people who did not grieve in the face of loss. This is not an example of Christian faith and hope, this is an example of a very unhealthy way to react to tragedy. On the other hand I have slightly more frequently met people who seemed to lose their faith in God when they faced tragedy and/or loss. And really, that has left me confused. Did they expect things to be easy? Did they think everyone they knew was going to live forever? Did they think that God had given us some promise to save us from suffering? We must have a faith which is honest enough for us to express our sadness and our grief, and realistic enough to recognize the inevitability of sadness and grief entering into our life.

Further Resources

Some of the best powerful resources come from those who have experienced great suffering. CS Lewis wrote his *A Grief Observed* after and about the death of his wife. The same is true of *A Severe Mercy* by Sheldon Vanauken.

Joni Eareckson Tada has essentially been a quadriplegic (she does have very limited use of her arms) for about forty years since injuring herself in a diving accident. She has written and spoken extensively discussing how God’s love can be known in the midst of suffering. A range of her materials are very helpful when it comes to dealing with this subject. I would particularly recommend her “Theology of Suffering” talk given at a Dallas Seminary Chapel session. It is available in video and audio format on iTunes.

Also helpful are some books which address these issues in a more systematic manner. *Making Sense Out of Suffering* by Peter Kreeft comes to mind, as does *Where is God When it Hurts?* by Phillip Yancey. The book *Case for Faith* by Lee Strobel contains a chapter on suffering, which draws heavily on the thought of Peter Kreeft, which is very good.

My homily from 2/8/09 contains a further discussion of the message of the book of Job. It can be found online at <http://www.sspeterandpaul.net/Homily.htm>