

**BORN TO TROUBLE:  
LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF JOB**

**Sunday AM Adult Bible Class, Spring 2013**

*The well-known events in Job's life are secondary to the book's extended look at perspectives on pain and suffering. Job and his friends represent a variety of human viewpoints, while God speaks his own words of wisdom. Job is not meant to be analyzed verse-by-verse, but rather to be considered from a broader perspective that can help us better to see things as God sees them.*

**Tentative Outline & Schedule:**

<b>Week</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Passage</b>
Week 1 - March 3	Job's Suffering	Job 1-3
Week 2 - March 10	The Big Questions	Job 4-7
Week 3 - March 17	Innocent Or Guilty?	Job 8-11
Week 4 - March 24	Hoping Against Hope	Job 12-14
Week 5 - March 31	What Does God Want?	Job 15-17
Week 6 - April 7	God & The Wicked	Job 18-21
Week 7 - April 14	Can A Man Be Righteous?	Job 22-25
Week 8 - April 21	Where Does Understanding Dwell?	Job 26-28
Week 9 - April 28	Past, Present, & Future	Job 29-31
Week 10 - May 5	The Voice Of Youth	Job 32-37
Week 11 - May 12	Out Of The Storm	Job 38-41
Week 12 - May 19	Starting Over	Job 42

The class on Job will be the first in a series of classes connected by the concept of perspective. The classes scheduled for later this year are:

Summer 2013: *The Beginning Of Wisdom: Studies In Proverbs*

Autumn 2013: *Set Your Hearts On Things Above: A Study Of Colossians*

Job will teach us perspective on the troubling questions of life, Proverbs provides spiritual perspective on daily living, and Colossians helps us to develop an eternal perspective.

**Bibliography:**

The following books can also be used by those who wish to study the book of Job further on their own. You're welcome to see me if you'd like recommendations.

Francis Andersen, *Job*, (Tyndale OT Commentary)

David Atkinson, *The Message Of Job* (Bible Speaks Today series)

John Hartley, *The Book Of Job* (NICOT)

Simonetti & Conti, *Ancient Christian Commentary On Scripture, Old Testament Volume 6: Job*

Elmer Smick & Frank Gaebelein (ed.), *Expositor's Bible Commentary, Vol. 4: 1 & 2 Kings - Job*

We shall also occasionally take a look at writings of secular philosophers, to compare and contrast their thoughts with the teachings of Scripture.

- Mark Garner, March 2013

## **BORN TO TROUBLE: LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF JOB**

### **Notes For Week One: Job's Sufferings (Job 1-3)**

*The book of Job opens with an account of the painful ordeal that suddenly overwhelms Job's life. For a time, Job holds up admirably well despite immense suffering; but eventually he becomes deeply discouraged. The introductory part of the book teaches several significant lessons about the nature of human suffering, and immediately puts to the test any pat answers on the subject.*

#### ***A Sudden Ordeal (Job 1)***

We are barely introduced to Job before we see him undergo a series of terrifying trials. Neither Job's relationship with God nor his earthly wealth can prevent this series of disasters. In presenting such an extreme example of seemingly unjust suffering, Scripture calls us to set aside our simplistic theories on the subject in order to open our minds to a new perspective.

When we meet Job\*, his life looks almost perfect (1:1-5). He has enormous wealth (as measured in his time), a large and loving family, and a good relationship with God. He seems to appreciate all that he has, and knows that he has it at God's pleasure. In his concern for his children, he regularly makes sacrifices on their behalf to ensure that God will keep them in his care. After seeing Job like this, his subsequent trials and losses will be that much more shocking.

\* Job is one of the oldest books of the Bible. It may have been written down as early as 1500 BC (500 BC at the latest), and the events it describes probably took place even earlier. Neither Job nor his homeland of Uz can be positively identified with anything else in the Bible (though commentators often try). It is all but certain, though, that Job lived in the patriarchal era. Commentators often place him in Edomite territory.

After we are acquainted with Job, the narration shifts to a strange scene (1:6-12). In a stylized conversation between God and Satan ("the accuser"\*), we see God's delight in Job contrasted with Satan's accusations against Job, claiming that Job loves God only because he has such a blessed life. The conversation ends with God, presumably confident that Satan's accusations are false, allowing the accuser the opportunity to prove himself right.

\* The Hebrew text calls him "the Satan", which literally means, "the accuser."

Since this scene is stylized, not literal (a literal description of celestial beings would be incomprehensible to us), we should avoid speculation on side issues and concentrate instead on its implications in terms of the causes of trouble in this world. The damage Satan can do is clearly limited by God. He is eager to harm Job - whether because he hopes that Job will curse God or whether he simply derives pleasure from causing pain - and the moment that Satan's limitations are relaxed, he immediately does extreme harm. His hatred for humanity leaves him with no self-control, and his attacks will have little subtlety or strategy - just pure malice\*.

\* This is shown at its greatest extreme at the crucifixion - Satan unleashed his full hatred against Jesus, yet in so doing he brought about his own downfall by fulfilling God's desire to redeem all of humanity's sins.

And so disaster strikes Job, through no fault of his own and completely unconnected with anything he has said, thought, or done (1:13-19). Some of his losses are replaceable, in a sense, but others are not. Even when Job has new sons and daughters after the ordeal is over, his first ten children will remain dead - and they will never leave his memory. As believers, it is important that we do not look for a simplistic way to explain away all that has happened to Job.

God did not cause Job's suffering, yet he knowingly allowed it. Nor is there a special way that God intends to bless Job in a way that would not have been possible without all these losses. We tend to try to control or exploit the problem of human suffering, rather than learning from it. When confronted with suffering - especially if it seems unjust\* - we may jump in with a saying or quote that we hope explains it away, we may assign blame, we may respond by worrying obsessively about the same thing happening to us, or we may use the situation to promote ourselves or our beliefs. All such responses reflect a desire to control or exploit the problem.

\* The often asked but misguided question, "why do bad things happen to good people" illustrates some of the problems that we have in looking at things from the right perspective. We are highly selective in our reactions to suffering, falling in with our society's ritualized grief over media-designated tragedies while routinely ignoring far greater suffering that happens to those whose situations we cannot relate to.

But Job's initial response is one of faith and humility (1:20-22). To be sure, at the moment he is so shocked by events that he may not fully realize all that has happened. But he truly does, at least for the moment, have some perspective on the situation. To know that, "naked I came, naked I will depart" does not make the present any less painful, yet Job knows that at some point he would have had to be ready to lose everything and leave this world anyway.

Notice that Job has the ability to put his own sufferings in perspective, whereas we too often find it easier to explain away the sufferings of others while demanding compensation for our own. Job's example reminds us to reverse our usual fleshly tendency.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Does it matter that this story took place so long ago? In what ways can we relate to Job's situation? In what ways is it hard? What qualities describe Satan? Why would God allow Satan to do so much harm to Job? What does this say about God? What should we learn from Job's response?

### ***Job's Trials Get Worse (Job 2)***

Far from being over, Job's problems now get worse. Satan gets a new opportunity to torment Job even more personally, leaving Job without any comfort or respite at all in this world. Job's wife and friends are helpless to do anything for him. They are all overwhelmed by this turn of events, which points out so clearly how fragile our lives in this world really are.

In the next scene, we see that Satan is still "roaming the earth" and looking to accuse humans (2:1-6). He is still filled with rage and hatred, for he is not satisfied with the agonies Job has already suffered. When we seek to understand our troubles in this world, one of the factors is Satan's unrelenting hatred of humanity. He will never feel that we have 'suffered enough'; he will never tire of bringing horrors and injustices upon humanity whenever he can.

God understands this, yet remarkably he even expands Satan's ability to harm Job, taking away the previous prohibition not to harm Job personally. And so we again face the same questions about God's role - he does not initiate the harm to Job, but does not stop it either.

So Satan strikes again, this time afflicting Job with awful sores all over his body (2:7-10). Job now has lost all possible comfort, with great physical suffering added to his unhealed emotional pain. He can no longer pursue his normal activities, and simply sits stunned on the ground. His wife makes things even worse with her insensitive comments; yet again Job for now keeps his faith. His remark that, "shall we accept good from God, and not trouble" should not be analyzed as a theological position, but rather should be seen as another instance of Job's willingness to accept his problems rather than reproaching or critiquing God.

We now meet Job's three friends, from whom we shall soon hear much more\* (2:11-13). Later they will go far astray and be directly rebuked by God, but this is their finest hour. They sit silently with Job for an entire week as a show of support and sympathy, knowing that what has happened speaks for itself. Though the rest of the book will present them in a bad light, for now they show themselves to be good friends who know that they cannot change what has happened.

\* The book is largely structured around their conversations with Job. After Job 3 (see below), each of Job's three friends speaks in turn, with Job responding to each. There are two full cycles (Job 4-21), followed by a partial cycle (Job 22-31) that is interrupted by the speech of Elihu, a younger man (Job 32-37). After Elihu's speech, God intervenes and speaks (Job 38-41, followed finally by the book's epilogue (Job 42).

Through these friends, God is showing his own love and compassion to Job. Regardless of what happens, regardless of why God allows bad things to happen to us, we can always be sure that he loves us. Trials and sufferings are never a sign of God's disfavor. God's love is constant, for the faithful and the faithless, the suffering and the happy, the foolish and the wise.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Is there anything different about this interaction between God and Satan? Why does Job's wife react as she does? What can we learn from this? In what ways are Job's friends an example to us so far?

### ***The Breaking Point (Job 3)***

Job has endured all of these horrors with a faithfulness that few persons ever demonstrate. Yet we all have a breaking point, and the time comes when Job's accumulated suffering and sorrow lead him to despair of life itself. When his wounded heart cries out in honest despair, we are not meant to judge or reason with him, but first to empathize and then to reflect.

Job has held up for a long time without complaint, but he now he despairs to the point of cursing the day of his birth (3:1-10). This is simply reality setting in\*. Note carefully that in everything Job says, he never criticizes God. He hates his life and he wonders what has gone wrong, yet he never presumes to know better than God. He is broken but still faithful.

\* Some commentators, afraid that Job's words might seem to prove that Satan has "won his debate" because Job is upset, try to minimize the vehemence of Job's outburst. Others, unable to identify with Job's ordeal, suggest that he has now turned away from God. Yet such gyrations are not needed - it is easy to understand Job's words as an overdue expression of his emotions after an extended period of severe trial.

Try to listen to Job's emotions, rather than evaluating the literal meaning of his words. The imagery in this chapter creates a dramatic expression of honest human despair - and as such it rises above secular philosophers' statements of existential anguish or humanitarian concern. All human suffering troubles God, even when allows it. Job's laments, like those of Jeremiah and the psalmists, remind us that God does not at all mind it when we express honest fear or pain.

Job's expressions of anguish grow even more striking as he longs for the release of the grave (3:11-19). His suffering, despair, and desperation seem worse to him than death would be. Yet even in his gloom, he expresses some profound thoughts and even a kind of hope. He senses not just the release of death but also the equality of death - no matter what we have on this earth, we are all assured of this day when we must give it all back. Neither rich nor poor are exceptions.

Are Job's statements true or false? This question will arise throughout the book, and even more so in the discourses of the other characters. Many or most of Job's factual statements are true - only his perspective, understandably clouded by his anguish, is frequently off. As long as we

understand Job's speeches as a search for understanding, rather than an attempt to convince others of his views, then we shall have little trouble appreciating them and learning from them.

So Job comes to the question that is discussed at length in the book: Why? (3:20-26). Why does God give blessings, only to take them away? Why are blessings so often intertwined with pain? For that matter, why are we here in this world? Job asks such questions honestly, if not always effectively. Before we can give meaningful answers, we must fully accept the legitimacy of these questions, and resist our urge to cram the profound problem of human suffering into a convenient box so that we do not have to challenge our understanding of God's role in it.

Job also inadvertently provides another lesson when he remarks that, "what I feared has come upon me". Recall that at the beginning of the book we saw Job offer sacrifices specifically to keep his children from harm - which, as it turns out, he was helpless to prevent. His simple acknowledgement of truth contains a profound lesson about our relationship with God (amongst other things). There is far more to our relationship with God than merely getting what we desire. Job knows that it is more important to stay close to God than to get back what he has lost.

The opening chapters of Job pose questions; they do not give answers. For now, we must be content with a few basic observations on pain as an aspect of this life. Job calls us to develop a new, spiritual (not materialistic, logical, or even philosophical) perspective on human suffering. A good start is to give up our attempts to control suffering, whether it others' or our own. The problem of human suffering is beyond the power of our logic and our efforts; it is beyond politicians, logicians, theologians, or engineers. God calls us to do something more important than trying to "solve" the problem of suffering. God aims to redeem it, not fix it or eliminate it.

Rejoicing and mourning are both part of life. Our own experiences will not be so extreme, yet we shall face many times of both joy and sorrow. When we receive blessings, it does not mean that we deserve them - it just means that God loves us. When we suffer, it does not mean that we have done anything wrong - it just means that we live in a fallen world. God still loves us just as much. We shall also encounter others both joyful and sorrowful; and we are called to, "rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn" (Romans 12:15).

Consider Jesus' example. He showed more concern for others' sufferings of others than for his own troubles. He helped everyone he could with their problems, yet remained focused on even higher priorities. He experienced both joy and sorrow as intensely as anyone could - this is part of what he meant by "life to the full". To be sensitive to suffering, and to yearn for something more than the speculations and pat answers of theologians, is inherent in following in his steps.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What does Job's lament tell us about his priorities? Are his observations about death accurate? How might someone who says these things be treated in today's church? Do we know yet how we are called to respond to him?

### ***For Further Study***

The separate class outline/schedule has a bibliography of references for studying Job.

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, March 2013*

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## **BORN TO TROUBLE: LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF JOB**

### **Notes For Week Two: The Big Questions (Job 4-7)**

*Though maintaining his faith throughout a series of horrible trials, Job eventually expresses deep despair and a desire for death. In response, his friends begin to voice their own ideas on what has happened to him. While they are frequently misguided in their beliefs, and though Job also struggles with his perspective, the ensuing conversations raise some worthwhile questions.*

#### ***Do The Innocent Ever Suffer? (Job 4)***

The first response to Job's despairing thoughts comes from his friend Eliphaz. In expressing his belief that God always protects the innocent and always punishes sinners, Eliphaz sincerely thinks that he is being faithful to God. But in fact he has made some crucial oversights - though we must use care in trying to separate his mistakes from the things he says correctly.

Eliphaz\* believes that in times of trouble we should put our hope in our righteousness (4:1-6). Eliphaz's approach\*\* is a common response to the kinds of suffering we saw in Job 1-3. He asks Job a simple question: why not simply rely on your piety, your righteousness, your good behavior. Surely that is what God wants - so wouldn't it assure us that he will give us what we desire? He is only stating in explicit words what a large majority of believers think, in any era.

\* Eliphaz and the designation Temanite are names associated with Edom. Otherwise we know nothing of Eliphaz's biographical details. With Job's other two friends Bildad and Zophar, we know even less.

\*\* Commentators usually consider Eliphaz the least misguided or insensitive of Job's friends. He relies on experience to promote his preconception that God always rewards 'good' and always punishes 'evil'. Much of what he says is true, but his approach is too simplistic. He speaks again in Job 15 and Job 22.

So, are the upright ever destroyed? (4:7-11). Eliphaz understands that the wicked are always at God's mercy, and he knows examples of 'bad' persons who have been punished or destroyed for their offenses. He has also seen examples of 'good' persons whose godly behavior has brought them rewards. Yet he makes this into a universal principle, based solely on wishful thinking.

We all long to see faithfulness rewarded and sin punished. The world would be less frightening and confusing if this always happened - but the real world is not so simple. Even in Eliphaz's time there were many exceptions. In our own more complicated society, we have to do a lot of rationalizing and logical contortions to convince ourselves that good is always rewarded and evil punished. There are also enormous injustices that come into play as soon as a person is born.

Yet Eliphaz has some worthwhile thoughts, as when he shares his trembling before God's presence (4:12-21). Our righteousness is indeed nothing compared with God's, and this should lead to constant humility on our parts. Truly we do live in houses of clay\*; we are no stronger than moths\*\*. We must seek God through grace and humility, not through fleshly righteousness or knowledge. Eliphaz senses this, but he cannot quite bring himself to see the whole picture.

\* This can be understood either as contrasting our perishable earthly homes with God's eternal dwelling place, or as referring to our fragile, mortal bodies (which Paul calls "jars of clay" in 2 Corinthians 4:7).

\*\* In the Hebrew text, the last phrase of verse 19 literally says, "crushed before a moth" - meaning either that we are even weaker than moths, or that even moths could crush us if God willed it.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Looking back at Job 1-3, what possible approaches might someone take in talking with Job? How do Eliphaz's beliefs parallel common Christian beliefs? How can this help us deepen our spiritual understanding of human pain? What good points has Eliphaz made? Can we tell where he is going astray?

### ***Who Will Answer You? (Job 5)***

Eliphaz understands that in times of trouble we should turn directly to God; and he appreciates God's greater wisdom and power. Yet his view of God is too impersonal, and it rests on some basic misconceptions. Job's situation should lead Eliphaz to question some of his comfortable assumptions, rather than trying to force Job's situation into his predetermined beliefs.

Eliphaz considers what to do when we need help (5:1-7). He realizes that the righteous cannot save the wicked from the consequences of their actions, and he realizes that "man (humanity\*) is born to trouble"; yet he does not grasp all that this means. He sees that our own mistakes can bring trouble upon ourselves. But he doesn't see that this fallen world, full of sinners with free will, brings plenty of trouble upon us completely unrelated to anything we ourselves may do.

\* Hebrew has three different words that are usually translated "man". The word used here (which in English is also the name Adam) means a mortal being, not necessarily male. See also the note on Job 7:17.

When Jesus warns his disciples that, "in this world you will have trouble" (John 16:33), he does not say, "therefore be obedient so that you won't have any trouble", but instead continues, "But take heart! I have overcome the world." His call to us is the same - many of our troubles in this world will not be our fault, nor will they all be part of some intricate design. God asks us to redeem sadness and suffering - not solve it or punish it - and to help others to do the same.

Eliphaz is at his best in describing God's transcendent nature (5:8-16). He genuinely appreciates God's wisdom and power, and he expresses it with well-chosen images. God can humble even the strongest humans at any time, and he is also able to look out for the interests of the poor and weak. Thus it is to God above all that we should look for answers to life's troubling questions.

In considering the discipline of the Almighty\*, Eliphaz combines correct basic ideas with his misconceptions (5:17-27). He is wise to recommend that we accept God's discipline even when it brings pain - this is a valid application of our awareness of God's greater knowledge. But he extrapolates this to the erroneous belief that God will always protect the righteous from all harm.

\* In Hebrew, "Shaddai", an expression found often in Job. It is used to emphasize God's absolute power.

So Eliphaz is not quite right to say that God wounds but also binds up. God can use even the worst disasters and sinful acts for a positive purpose, but this does not mean that he causes the problems (though, as with Job, he allows them and accepts responsibility for this). God is not deterministic, making everything happen according to a pre-arranged plan. Instead, he takes human society as it is, redeems pain and suffering when we let him, and calls us to do the same.

Eliphaz has some good thoughts but some key missing elements. He reasons from experience\* (inductively) rather than from theology (deductively) - this is all right in itself, but he ignores God's grace and underestimates the effects of human free will, seeing our relationship with God in overly impersonal terms. He seems well-intentioned, yet he is afraid to reconsider his preconceptions. He is willing to ask little questions but not the deeper ones that really matter.

\* By contrast, Bildad will reason primarily from theology, and Zophar primarily from morality.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What does it mean to be "born to trouble"? In what sense is Eliphaz right about this? How may he be mistaken? What aspects of God's character does he understand and appreciate? Which aspects does he not understand?

### ***Why Keep Up Hope? (Job 6)***

For his part, Job already accepts - at least on an intuitive level - the basic practical truths that can be found amidst all of Eliphaz's other ideas. But Job's concerns, at least for the moment, are more elemental. Broken by his agonizing ordeal, he is looking for spiritual reasons to go on, to hold out some hope, to find some reason not to give in completely to overwhelming despair.

Job desperately hopes to seek some measure of joy amidst all the pain he must endure\* (6:1-10). He longs for the release of death, feeling that to be so badly crushed but still alive is worse than death. Though presently without hope, Job remains open for any possible reason to go on. And because of this he finds a reason for consolation.

\* The imagery in verses 1-7 is vivid, but sometimes ambiguous - in some places the meaning of the Hebrew text (which is very old - see last week's notes) can no longer be determined with precision.

Job's consolation, his source of joy amidst unrelenting pain, is in simply remaining faithful - remaining true to the words of God as best he can understand them. Even though Job holds on to this mainly out of desperation, rather than optimism or hope, his view of his relationship with God is in certain respects quite healthy. His desire to stay faithful to God has nothing to do with reward, compensation, or relief. Job senses that somehow his relationship with God matters for its own sake, independently of what God does or does not give him. This is the kind of powerful realization that we can reach only by setting aside comfortable platitudes and slogans about God.

Job's immediate hope, though, is for release - he openly asks, "why should I go on?" (6:11-20). He feels his strength failing, and already senses that he cannot depend on his brothers (friends) for understanding or insight. He is afraid even to hope, because he knows it can lead to more disappointment. He compares himself to a stream during the hot, dry season or to a caravan desperately searching for water in the desert - vivid images of his spiritual thirst.

Yet Job really is not asking for much (6:21-30). He does not demand that God return his lost family members and possessions; he demands no compensation for his losses. For now, he simply seeks legitimacy for his questions. God doesn't yet answer in a way that Job understands, and his friends (even more so later) talk past his needs and just express their own views. Amidst the madness, Job understands something important but often overlooked. Just asking the deeper questions can be more important than having clever or brilliant answers to trivial questions.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: In what sense would his own faithfulness be a consolation to Job? Can we tell exactly what he means by this? What do the images in this chapter tell us about Job's state of mind? Is he wrong to be so discouraged?

### ***Why Is Life So Hard? (Job 7)***

As Job continues, he asks question after question, with many of them coming back to the same basic concerns. It may never before have occurred to Job that life can be so hard; but in any case he now understands how difficult it can be, not only for himself but for anyone. Job is especially concerned with the implications this has in our relationship with God.

As Job wonders why humans must put in such hard service on earth, he considers some basic aspects of the human condition (7:1-10). Like Eliphaz, he realizes that humanity is "born to trouble", but his understanding of this is deeper. Rather than focusing on our surface flaws and immediate desires, Job ponders the agonizing limitations that come from our mortality.

First Job uses imagery that emphasizes how time sometimes passes so slowly, particularly during times of distress, as to be unbearable. As mortals, in difficult times we can never know when - or often if - they will end. Yet at other times time passes so swiftly that life seems like a breath. We can barely appreciate or enjoy what we have because time keeps hurtling into the future. Job is not asking for this to change - but he does plead for God to understand how hard this can be.

So Job tells his friends and God that he simply cannot keep silent (7:11-16). His vivid imagery shows that he is doing much more than merely asking for relief or for recompense for his problems. Rather, the trials he has endured have helped him focus on even deeper, perhaps even more troubling questions. He is desperately seeking some measure of meaning in this mortal world. He senses that it is to be found in God, but at present he is battling his discouragement and his own troubled mind in an attempt to find what kind of meaning God really offers.

His questions remind us of one of the most important, but often overlooked, aspects of the gospel of Jesus. "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity ..." (Hebrews 2:14). Jesus' willingness to live a life in a mortal human body enables him to understand the full range of temptations, sorrows, joys, and possibilities good and bad that every human faces.

So Job ponders an even more basic question: "what is a human?"\* (7:17-21). We are created by God, created to know God, and are all accountable to God - but what does all this imply? We receive an awful lot of attention from the boundless God who made us, but is this good or bad?

\* Job's words parallel the same question in Psalm 8:4 - in both cases the word translated "man" here means a human being, or humanity in general, rather than a male individual. It is a poetic word, not the same as the word used in Job 5:7 (see above); and also not the common word for a male individual.

God knows everything about us, everything we do or say or think, and everything that happens to us. We certainly value his attention when we need his help or understanding; yet there are often times when we feel guilty or anxious under his constant scrutiny, especially when our perspective has been distorted by our own sin or, like Job, by misfortune. Job again does not answer this question; he only wants to ask it. Job has been pleading for grace above all.

In looking back at Job's words in chapters 6 and 7, we see his simple desire for truth, which at present is channeled through a perspective heavily affected by grief and pain. At times Job makes profound observations, while at other times his words simply reflect his despair. But at all times he is not afraid to ask what is really going on. Any concern about specific issues is less important than his desire truly to improve his understanding of God's nature and character.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What is the difference between Eliphaz and Job in their understanding of the troubles and pains in this world? How would we describe Job's relationship with God at present? How might Christians respond to Job's words? What do we see about his priorities, and what can we learn from them?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, March 2013

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## **BORN TO TROUBLE: LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF JOB**

### **Notes For Week Three: Innocent Or Guilty? (Job 8-11)**

*After the first exchange of ideas between Job and Eliphaz, the conversation between Job and his friends turns to questions of guilt or innocence. Bildad and Zophar are especially interested in pinning Job down, trying to get him to admit some wrongdoing that may explain what has happened to him. Their ideas parallel a number of beliefs that are common in any era.*

#### ***The Theologian's Certainty (Job 8)***

We now hear from Job's second friend, Bildad. His approach is more theological and analytical than that of the experience-minded Eliphaz. Yet Bildad is just as convinced that Job's situation is a simple one when it is viewed properly. And while Bildad is also self-assured and confident in his views of God, this is only because he too will not question his own comfortable assumptions.

Bildad\* includes a rather shocking accusation in his speech to Job (8:1-10). Like Eliphaz, he 'reminds' Job that because God is always fair, he would never allow any perversion of justice. Yet not only does Bildad rebuke Job more forcefully - he even accuses Job's children of sinning, explicitly stating that their sudden deaths could only have occurred as punishment for their sins.

\* Commentators generally describe Bildad as a theologian and/or a traditionalist, who relies on a combination of doctrine and time-honored beliefs to explain his views. He will speak again in Job 18 and Job 25. We know nothing of Bildad's biographical details.

Unaware of his own extreme insensitivity, Bildad informs Job that he need only "ask the former generations" to verify the reliability of his theology. Though Bildad expresses some genuine truths about God, he does not really understand them - he is just repeating them because he 'knows' that they are true. And like Eliphaz, he will not allow anything to call his long-held viewpoints into question - the only difference is that Bildad relies more on reason and theology (deductive reasoning) than on experience and example (inductive reasoning).

Thus, although he does say some worthwhile things, Bildad essentially has a very comfortable view of God (8:11-22). Like many Christians with similar perspectives today, he does not realize that even though he may work hard to promote his views, and although he is probably willing to help others in many outward ways, he has accepted a view of God that allows him simply to deny a lot of the troubling questions that God and the world both pose to us.

Bildad's thoughts on the fragility of life on earth are indeed worthwhile. The imagery in verses 12-19 compares well with similar passages from the Psalms and prophets\* in emphasizing God as the only true source of life and growth, as well as in underlining the hazards of putting confidence in worldly attainments. Yet he has made a grave oversight, because life is equally fragile for the righteous and the innocent, not only for the wicked and the sinful.

\* Similar passages would include Psalm 1:3-4, 37:1-4, 37:35-36, 90:4-6; and Isaiah 35:6-10, 55:10-13.

Bildad's comfortable assurances to Job - like the well-meaning but shallow ways we sometimes deal with similar matters - fall flat. He refuses to see that Job's trials call into question his preconceptions about God. Like many believers today, he will not acknowledge the depth of injustice and suffering on this earth. Theologies, traditions, and even sincere good works are not enough to explain away the awful things that happen to so many persons in our fallen world. It

is good when our faith allows us to take our own daily burdens and disappointments in stride because we know that God can use them for a positive purpose. But to explain away all the horrors of the world because 'I know God has a plan' is not faith - it is insensitivity.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: How does Bildad's approach differ from Eliphaz's? In what ways is it the same? What preconceptions about God do we have that we are unwilling to reconsider? How do we feel when they are called into question? How do Bildad's statements about God compare with similar passages elsewhere?

### ***Job & God (Job 9)***

While his friends are eager to persuade Job of their theological opinions, Job is far more concerned about his relationship with God. He has never questioned God's majesty, wisdom, or dominion; but in his present situation these have now become frightening to him. And yet he still perceives an important truth: that he can only hope to stand before God by grace.

A major source of Job's increasing discouragement is that his friends keep 'explaining' and 'informing him' of things about God that he fully believes - he has never had any argument with the fact that God is just and mighty, or that it is important to remain faithful to God (9:1-13). His friends are saying many things about God that are true, but that are not helpful - and indeed, they do not understand most of these things very well in their own hearts.

Job's images\* of God's power show that he understands God just as well as his self-assured, polished friends do. His expressive appreciation of God's nature is also a practical reminder to us: there is nothing faithless or disloyal or unspiritual about asking the kind of questions that Job has been asking. Others even greater have asked, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Psalm 22:1, Matthew 27:46). In truth, Job has a better awareness of God's nature than his friends do - and it is exactly this that troubles him so much. It is the shallowness of his friends' beliefs that makes it so easy for them to dismiss inconvenient questions with pat answers.

\* Many of these images are worthy of attention in their own right. For example, the list of constellations in verse 9 not only honors God as the creator of the stars - Job also chooses a series of constellations that (in his time and place) represent the four seasons, implicitly recognizing God's absolute control over time as well.

Having shown his friends that he, too, can express eloquent thoughts about God, Job points out that the drawback of being innocent\* is that he cannot pretend to find some sin that has allegedly committed, as an explanation of why he is now being 'punished' (9:14-20). Job knows that God owes him nothing; but he does have a real concern, which he expresses in verses 15-16. He knows full well that neither his words nor his righteousness can compare with God's - he just longs for some assurance that God is listening\*\*, that God understands what he is going through.

\* When Job calls himself 'innocent' (*i.e.* in verse 15), he does not mean innocent of all sin. He merely believes that he has never done anything of a magnitude that would be worthy of all that he has suffered.

\*\* The second half of verse 16 is difficult to translate, and can mean a couple of different things. The NIV has Job saying that even if God responded, "I do not believe he would give me a hearing". The NASB, probably more literally accurate, says instead that even if God answered, "I could not believe that he was listening to my voice." In either case, Job is asking above all for assurance that God really hears him.

Confused and uncertain, Job asks what he should do now, knowing that he can only rely on God's willingness to be merciful (9:21-35). He feels his life slipping away, yet even this is not as troubling as his spiritual concerns. He wants to die anyway, yet he does not want to do so

without understanding God a little better. This is why he longs for an arbiter\* (verses 32-35) to help him become convinced that God has really heard him and taken his sufferings into account.

\* Some commentators, influenced by Job's choice of words, conjecture that Job is asking for a formal legal hearing before God. But this theory overlooks Job's main concern - he is not demanding any kind of recompense from God, but rather is primarily concerned about his relationship with God.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Does Job need to prove that he still has faith in God? What kind of faith does he have at present? What does Job mean by saying that he is innocent? What kind of answer or re-assurance does he want from God? How does this differ from what his friends think he needs? What kind of "arbiter" is he looking for?

### *Creator & Created (Job 10)*

Certain in his awareness that God is his Creator, Job now focuses on what this might imply in his relationship with God. It makes no sense to Job that God would harm or frighten his own creations, yet that is what seems to have happened to him. Job now starts to wonder that perhaps he really has done something seriously wrong - and this reinforces his desire to die.

When Job pleads with God to remember that God made him, this is another indication of the things that really concern Job (10:1-12). He is neither reproving God nor asking for a reward - instead, he is anxiously trying to understand how God would allow such awful things to happen to his own handiwork. Could it actually please God to treat his own creations oppressively, to allow them to suffer, even if it is only passive acceptance rather than active mistreatment?

This is a perfectly valid question, and by no means does it disturb God for Job (or us) to ask it. Job fully remembers and recognizes God's many kindnesses - and the ones that mean the most to Job are not material things, but rather the closeness God is willing to have with his creations. "O Lord, what is man that you care for him, the son of man that you think of him?" (Psalm 144:3).

Yet the very intimacy that he has had with God troubles him when he thinks that God may not be listening to him now - and again, it is the depth of Job's understanding of God that troubles him, while his friends are not troubled by things that they never understood very well to begin with.

But now something sad starts to happen to Job, as he slowly begins to wonder whether maybe he is guilty, whether maybe he did do something awful for which he now deserves to suffer such pain and loss (10:13-22). The accumulated testimony of these "witnesses" to Job's 'evident' sinfulness has started to make him wonder whether they are right after all. Indeed, God himself has said nothing so far to correct them. And unfortunately Job at present has no answer to this, so that it merely reinforces a renewed longing for the release of death.

Criticism and induced guilt affect the human psyche far more than encouragement and praise do. Just as Job's well-meaning but shallow friends have managed to convince him of something untrue, manipulative methods and shallow slogans may produce outward results - but they ruin any effort to deepen our personal closeness with God and our awareness of his presence.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: How does being God's creation affect Job's understanding of God? How does it make it hard for him to understand what has happened? Is there a way to resolve this that Job doesn't see? Why does he now start to wonder if he has done something wrong? Is this good? What should we learn from it?

## *The Moralists' Urgings (Job 11)*

Now Job's third friend, Zophar, adds a further viewpoint to the discussion. Zophar is the type of moralist who can always find something that others are doing wrong, and his recipe for everyone is pretty much the same: repent of sin and get busy doing righteous acts. He assures Job of complete happiness, if only he will follow the program that Zophar lays out for him.

Zophar\* strongly disapproves of Job's words, and he seems a bit perturbed that the other two have not spoken more convincingly (11:1-12). Confronted with a situation that displeases him, he is determined to 'set the record straight' in order to take control of the situation.

\* Commentators often, perhaps unfairly, condemn Zophar even more strongly than the other two friends. He is to some degree a theologian like Bildad, but one who emphasizes morality and works more than abstract or theological principles about God - to Zophar, the answer to everything is to repent and/or to perform more good works. Zophar will speak again in Job 20, and after that will remain silent.

So we now see the moralist at work. Zophar is sure of himself and of his beliefs, which no doubt made him well-respected in the religious circles of his day. He is even gracious in his own mind, patronizingly assuring Job that "some of" his sins have already been forgiven. Zophar instructs Job on basic matters that, in fact, Job understands more fully. He doesn't see Job's situation as a special case, since he primarily views everyone's relationship with God in terms of sin and guilt, punishment and repentance, and atoning good works (this becomes even clearer later).

His simple (or simplistic) plan follows from his view of God (11:13-20). He says some truthful things, yet he does not understand them. Yes, it is good to "devote your heart to him and stretch out your hands to him"; but Zophar cannot distinguish his way from God's. Zophar is so sure of his moral program and beliefs that he judges everyone on his own terms. So too, otherwise faithful Christians ignore or even defend the suffering, injustice and oppression in the world because they are trained to be insensitive to it, in order to focus on their own religious agendas.

Having heard from all three of Job's friends, we can compare their thoughts on God, humanity, and suffering. Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar share some similarities, yet each has his own way of trying to force everything into a comfortable, preconceived framework. They also represent perspectives common today: Eliphaz could be the believer who tries to approach every need by telling an 'inspirational' story; Bildad the one who always has a Scripture or a quote that to him eliminates any question; Zophar the person who always has a program or activity that we 'need to' be a part of. So let us not condemn them either, for they simply show us ourselves.

The gospel calls us to move beyond the preoccupation with guilt and innocence that leads Job's friends astray and that also derails churches and believers today. We are called not to judge - not to decide who deserves punishment, not to decide who is 'spiritual' or 'a true disciple', not to withhold love and grace from those in need simply because we think they may have caused their own problems. We all desperately need grace, and always shall. We thus should show grace to everyone, and "with the measure you use, it will be measured to you" (Matthew 7:1-2).

Questions For Discussion Or Study: How does Zophar's approach compare with that of the other two friends? Does he say anything good? What preconceptions is he unwilling to reconsider? What parallels to each of these three do we find in our own experience? What problems do they cause? Can their perspectives be turned into something positive?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, March 2013

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## **BORN TO TROUBLE: LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF JOB**

### **Notes For Week Four: Hoping Against Hope (Job 12-14)**

*Each of Job's three friends has tried unsuccessfully to get Job to acknowledge some wrongdoing that has caused his misfortunes. Job is somewhat frustrated with their inability to sympathize with him, but some far more important things are foremost in his mind. He very much wants to understand God's role in all this, and he would really like to have some reasons for hope.*

#### ***In His Hand Is Life (Job 12)***

Although Job's friends think that he has lost confidence in God, in actuality Job has a keen awareness of God's greatness and his divine qualities. But in his present state of mind, God's overwhelming power and knowledge have become intimidating to Job, for he knows that he could never out-talk or out-maneuver God - he knows he will have to accept whatever God wills.

Job feels that he has reluctantly become a laughingstock\* to those around him (12:1-6). This is probably not literally true, as it seems unlikely that anyone would be laughing - but what he is really expressing is his discomfort with the ways that his misfortunes have affected his relationships. His sarcasm in verse 2 (see also Job 13:5-9) illustrates this in a different way. His friends' preconceptions of God have turned them into tormentors instead of comforters.

\* The expression in the text suggests a feeling of embarrassment combined with guilt, induced by being treated as if he were suffering because of his own wrongdoing.

Job observes that, "men at ease have contempt for misfortune". It is simply human nature for our minds to produce reasons not to care about others' troubles. When things are going well for us, we just don't want to be troubled by something discouraging. The worldly adjust to this by blowing things out of proportion, in order to get our attention - every problem becomes a 'crisis', every accomplishment becomes 'historic', every misfortune becomes a 'tragedy'. That too is just human nature - but we also do the same thing within the church, and we should know better.

Job's rhetorical plea to "ask the animals" suggests that his friends should consider more carefully the meaning of their own words (12:7-12). They all know that God is the source of life and wisdom, but Job understands this better and sees the implications more fully. Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar speak of God's power and his creation as if these somehow absolved them of any responsibility, whereas Job accepts it as a call to reconsider who he is and what his life means.

His references to the natural world are not a mere appeal to dismiss everything that happens because 'God has a plan' - rather, these images remind us that God's breath and God's hand permeate our world\*, such that even the animals are implicitly aware of God's presence and also implicitly remind us of God's presence. Job's sensitivity to God's presence or absence - and the implications thereof - differ markedly from his friends' more trivial conceptions of God.

\* The same will be true of God's famous reply to the group in Job 38-41. This lengthy series of images about Creation are not God's way of warning us not to question him, but rather a call for us to remember and ponder his intimate contact with every aspect of his creations and their lives.

Job keenly understands that everyone is at God's mercy (12:13-25). His images of God's hand bringing sudden and dramatic change illustrate Job's newly enhanced awareness not only of his own vulnerability but also of the absolute dependence we all have on God. His friends have said

similar things, but from a more impersonal viewpoint that avoided the real issues. Job, for his part, is willing to battle through both an acceptance of this and also the implications.

Job's acceptance of some powerful (and intimidating) truths show again that he is looking well beyond his own situation. His own troubles have helped him to see that the wise and the foolish, the powerful and the weak, the rich and the poor are all at every moment dependent on God's grace for their lives, happiness, and sustenance.

At present, Job sees only the more frightening of the implications of all this; but he is willing to keep trying to understand - unlike his friends, who are unwilling to reconsider their long-held beliefs. Discerning believers are always able to be forthright in facing the more harrowing aspects of life: "We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead . . ." (2 Corinthians 1:8-9).

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Is Job right that we are more insensitive to others when things are going well for us? To what degree should we learn from his feelings about this? In what sense does he want us to "ask the animals"? What lessons has Job drawn from the Creation? How does his understanding differ from his friends'?

### ***Faithful No Matter What (Job 13)***

Job has already decided in his heart that he will remain faithful to God, no matter what happens and regardless of whether God answers him or not. Even when he pleads with God to listen and understand, he makes no conditions in return - he simply wants God to understand that it will be much easier for him to stay close to God if God will explain a few troubling points.

To Job, his friends' well-meaning but insensitive speeches are "proverbs of ashes", fine-sounding sayings holding little true understanding (13:1-12). His pain leads him to be rather sarcastic again, implicitly mocking his friends' intentions to be God's spokesmen and asking whether they are really trying to help him or whether they are just trying to show off and look good. As is so often the case even among believers, they are not really engaged with Job's needs, but instead are defending and promoting their own pre-established viewpoints.

Job then makes a simple promise and a simple request (13:13-19). His request is merely to have his voice be heard, for his friends to stop their ill-advised attempts to 'instruct' him so that he can communicate with them and, more importantly, with God. All along, Job has been keenly interested in knowing simply whether God is aware of his struggles. Now Job promises to accept whatever comes his way if only he can be assured that he has had his chance to be heard.

Job goes even farther - promising to trust in God unconditionally, even if God should go as far as putting Job to death\*. This is neither an expression of blind optimism nor a hyper-confident assertion of great faith, just "not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:39). Job is discouraged, fearful, without any real hope. His confidence is not in being certain that God will eventually bless him, nor is it in any dogmatic belief that God always 'has a plan'. It is, instead, a trust in God's presence and God's nature that is as hard to define as it is to find, even in Christians.

\* The usual translation of verse 15 renders Job as saying that, "though he slay me, yet will I hope (or trust - KJV) in him" (NIV). Some versions and commentators render it (more literally) as, "he will slay me; I have no hope" (RSV). Yet the context suggests that Job is putting his faith and hope in a concept of God that completely transcends whatever happens to Job himself; that is, that Job will trust God no matter what.

It is Job's appreciation of the importance of God's presence that leads him to ask God, "why do you hide your face?" (13:20-28). It is absolutely true that God has never really left Job; yet it is quite understandable that Job struggles to be sure of this. Once again, it is Job's very understanding of God that leads him to wrestle with this question. His friends don't worry whether God is present or not, because in their shallow conceptions of God this doesn't matter.

Much of Job's rhetoric in this passage comes down to him essentially requesting a 'truce' of sorts with God. He feels that God's hand has been against him, and he is baffled as to the reasons for this - yet he also fully accepts that God has the ability and the right to act however he pleases. Job is completely consistent in never asking for any kind of compensation or even apology for what he has suffered. His desire for a face-to-face meeting\* with God is not for the purpose of making demands, but in order that he can be re-assured that God is present and that God is fully aware of how Job feels. Job would draw hope from that even if it produces no 'results'.

\* Because of Job's statement that, "I have prepared my case" (verse 18), commentators sometimes conjecture that Job is seeking some kind of legal or formal hearing. But his main concern is not presenting a 'case' *per se*. Rather, that is only a means to an end - restoring and strengthening his closeness with God.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What can we tell about Job's attitude towards his friends? Is it warranted? What can we tell about his relationship with God? How is he able to proclaim an unconditional faith in God, while at the same time believing that God's hand is against him? Are there lessons we can get from this?

### ***The Fragility Of Life (Job 14)***

Job's experience has made him keenly aware of the fragility of all life on this earth. He fully accepts that everything we have in this world is highly temporary, and he fully accepts God's right to make it this way. Job's main concern with all this is to find a new source of hope, now that his perspective on everything has been so drastically changed.

Job's problems and his awareness of the problems of others have given him a sense of futility about life on earth, a sense that we are all only putting in our time here (14:1-6). Job's traumatic experiences have taught him that life is not only short, but often full of trial and trouble as well. He is not thinking only of himself, for he has realized that there are many others who must constantly live with the kind of sorrow and suffering he has now undergone.

If this is all that our lives here are about - if the temporary joys we experience are our only hope - then Job wonders if the best thing for everyone might be for God just to look away from us all, to suspend judgment permanently and just let us struggle through what little time we have.

Such questions about the 'meaning of life' have pre-occupied philosophers, both believing and unbelieving, throughout the ages. The inherent mortality of every human presents a challenge to any mind. Worldly perspectives range from Aristotle, who believed that the pursuit of personal excellence (in Greek, ἀρετή, "arete") would provide lasting meaning despite our mortality, to Schopenhauer, whose bleak vision of life led him to see tragic despair everywhere.

Believing perspectives range from Aquinas and the Scholasticists, who sought satisfaction from a theological system that explained everything, to Kierkegaard, whose existential view sought inner peace through something approximating a resigned acceptance of our nature. Neither philosophy nor theology really provides more than a sophisticated form of sleight-of-hand.

God simply tells us that, "since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death . . . and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death" (Hebrews 2:14-15). Jesus' death does not exempt us from physical death, but it is our guarantee that - amongst many other things - God knows what it is like to be a mortal whose life on this earth must someday come to an end.

Is mortality then natural or unnatural? (14:7-12). In an extraordinary passage, Job expresses his envy for trees, which not only can long outlive humans but also can seemingly regenerate after death\*. Job still sees nothing better for himself than to die and be released from pain, and this has led him to ponder the meaning of what it means to be alive at all.

\* Job probably does not literally believe that a tree cut down at the stump can live again; but he would certainly have seen trees and other plants whose powers of regeneration allowed them to recover from damage and to revive after lengthy spells of dormancy. And of course trees are still a symbol of longevity - many kinds of trees can live for hundreds of years, and some kinds can live for thousands of years.

Job's imagery goes beyond the surface question about the meaning of our daily existence, for he is probing the mystery of our human nature\* itself. Is there something about us that persists after physical death? Of what does it consist? Would it be good or bad to live forever? As with his questions about suffering, his deeper understanding leads him to wonder about questions that his well-meaning but complacent friends won't ask. From a Christian perspective, it also calls us to examine our hope in eternity and to understand it more deeply.

\* Commentators often misinterpret Job's perspective because of the common misconception that the ancient Jews did not believe in an afterlife. Given that even ancient and primitive societies invariably have an awareness of the eternal nature of humanity, it would be odd (to say the least) if God's own people were the exception. The ancient Jews did not have a doctrine about the afterlife - that is, they did not presume to know what it would be like or where it would be - but this does not mean that they did not believe in it.

Although Job at present can barely put his deeper thoughts into words, he has a strong awareness that there is a dimension to humanity that makes humans fundamentally different from the rest of the physical universe (14:13-22). Job realizes that what he really seeks and waits for is not actually death, but some kind of release (or renewal - the word can mean either) from the pains of existence - not just from his present pains but from the troubling issues they have raised.

Job is remarkably aware of God's compassion, for knows with certainty that God "will long for the creature your hands have made"; he knows that no matter what seems to be the case, God loves him. In this profound chapter, Job adds to his questions about God's presence or absence a new set of questions about humanity, mortality, and hope. At present he has more questions than answers - but he asking some questions that should be asked.

Job's quest for a source of hope has led him to seek a better understanding of the nature of humanity itself (recall Job 8:17-18, and see also Psalms 8:4-6, 144:3-4, Hebrews 2:5-9). He is not interested in pat answers, and indeed is not even looking for an answer in the conventional sense so much as a deeper understanding of the relationship between God and his creations.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Which of Job's questions or concerns would most Christians understand? Which ones do believers usually ignore? Are secular viewpoints on these subjects worth considering? How can a deeper understanding of our humanity help us build faith? Can it help us develop hope?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, March 2013

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## **BORN TO TROUBLE: LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF JOB**

### **Notes For Week Five: What Does God Want? (Job 15-17)**

*Job's friends now each speak for a second time, beginning with Eliphaz. Since Job has not accepted their appeals for him to repent of sin, they become firmer and more critical of him. Yet they have little new to say, while Job continues slowly to work through some tough questions. They are certain of what God wants from Job, but Job realizes that he has much to learn.*

#### ***Is Job Rebelling Against God? (Job 15)***

Now that he has listened to Job explain his feelings and perspectives, Eliphaz has stronger feelings about the situation. Whereas previously he thought that it was a simple matter of Job confessing whatever sins he had committed, now he feels that Job is compounding his offense and undermining God. So he gives Job a strong warning about what happens to the wicked.

Eliphaz is particularly upset that, in his mind, Job is hindering others from being devoted to God (15:1-6). Instead of happily participating in religious observance and assuming that good things will automatically follow, Job is asking questions that Eliphaz finds inappropriate and disturbing. Thus Eliphaz accuses Job of undermining those who want to promote personal piety, and he even characterizes Job's speeches as being motivated by a desire to sin\*.

\* Besides the overt accusation in verse 5, the imagery in verse 1 implies the same thing, when he says that Job "fills his belly with the hot east wind". The east wind came from the desert and was brutally hot, often dangerous - so he is saying that Job's words are not only empty, but also destructive and dangerous.

Is Job actually sinning by his attitude or his words? Indeed, he is hindering those who, like his friends, promote serving God as a matter of pre-determined objectives or activities. And he has certainly said some things about God that would raise a lot of eyebrows in the church today (and see also 16:11-14 below, in which Job uses even stronger language about God). Yet Eliphaz and the others are making a common mistake, in misidentifying discouragement as faithlessness.

There are many instances of David, Paul, Jesus, and many other faithful believers falling into despair at the sin, injustice, or apparent bleakness of this world. The important question is not whether someone is happy or energetic at a given moment - the question is, rather, whether a struggling believer is determined to be faithful no matter what, whether one can honestly say "yet not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:39).

Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar all draw confidence from their belief that the aged and experienced 'agree' with them - or in Eliphaz's telling phrase, that they "are on our side" (15:7-16). Seeing belief or ministry as a battle of wills, as a contest between different 'sides', is in itself a tipoff of a deeper problem. In genuine gospel ministry there is no room for adversarial attitudes, even if someone is actually doing something wrong.

Eliphaz is motivated in part by honest concern about Job, but this is based on a misunderstanding that has always been common amongst believers. He keeps saying the same things over and over, because he has a fixed idea of what God wants from Job. Because of his preconception that the only way to God is through correctness, he feels that God will not hear Job unless Job is flawless in what he says - and of course Eliphaz measures flawlessness by his own beliefs.

Thus Eliphaz gives Job a speech about the dangers of shaking his fist at God (15:17-35). Yet Job has no intention of pursuing a life of evil - he has no intention of taking anything that is not his, no desire to lie or to deceive anyone, no thought of pursuing immoral desires. Eliphaz gives this entire pointless speech\* because he cannot see that Job is completely faithful to God despite his struggles. He is stuck in his thinking that Job is guilty of some sin that has driven God away from him, for which (he thinks) God wants Job to repent.

\* Eliphaz has also made another mistake, in repeating his doctrine that God will always at some point punish the guilty by taking away their ill-gotten possessions. He had previously used this to demonstrate that Job must be guilty of some sin in order to be suffering so much. The book of Job shows us how entrenched such views are in our human nature, since the story of Job predates the passages in Deuteronomy and other books that are often misinterpreted as promising immediate rewards for faithfulness and immediate punishment for sin.

Yet we can still learn from Eliphaz. He does seem to care about Job, and if he would just step back to examine his own preconceptions, he could probably be very helpful. It is just human nature to fixate constantly on the same apparent problem with the same familiar methods, convinced that 'one size fits all'. Job's extreme situation could have led Eliphaz to some new insights, but instead he expects Job (and God) to conform to his own expectations.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What kind of devotion or piety is Job hindering, according to Eliphaz? Why does this bother him? How can we learn from this? Why is it hard for him to adjust his perspective and his expectations? How can we apply this?

### ***Mixed Feelings (Job 16:1-21)***

For his part, Job is still battling some highly mixed feelings about God. In vivid terms, he describes his feeling that God has attacked him; yet he also understands that God is his only source of hope. It can be a complicated matter to discern Job's viewpoint at present, because he continues to feel intense pain at the same time that he is coming to some powerful realizations.

Job's characterization of his friends as "miserable comforters" has become a byword (16:1-5). Yet instead of harping on their repeated mistakes, we can learn to adjust our own understanding and our expectations of what God wants. As Job says, it is indeed easy to give fine-sounding speeches about God when it is someone else who is suffering.

Yet it is good to remember that his friends started off with the caring, patient gesture of merely being with Job when they first heard about his troubles - and thus it would not have been too hard for them to provide the right kind of edification if they had simply adjusted their own perspectives first. Their character is good - their preconceptions are the problem. Even caring believers today, likewise, are often led far astray by their theological assumptions.

Job uses vivid language in describing how God unexpectedly 'assaulted' him (16:6-14). His imagery is unsettling, and it must have disturbed his friends all the more. Yet Job is not declaring opposition to God. He is, first of all, responding to Eliphaz's thoughts about the misdeeds of wicked persons, by pointing out that he has not wronged or harmed anyone - he is, instead, the aggrieved. Believers today, too, sometimes are so eager to find something to rebuke that they reproach the struggling, rather than listening to them or encouraging them.

And Job is not even so much expressing frustration with God as he is expressing despair with his trials and the apparent lack of hope. His eyes are red with weeping, and his heart weighed down by confusion and pain. He knows well that God does not hate him, and that God is not unfair -

but it sure feels that way right now to Job, and he knows that there is no purpose in pretending that he feels good. God is certainly aware of how Job feels (and of how we feel); and by being honest, Job is giving God the best chance of helping him to work through everything\*.

\* Several Psalms describe a similar process of working through discouragement or fear by honestly expressing one's thoughts. See, for example, Psalm 22, Psalm 42, and Psalm 73 (all by different authors).

Job returns to his central need as he pleads with God for grace (16:15-21). In one of the book's key ideas, he expresses his need for an advocate, an intercessor\* to bridge the gap between himself and God. Job longs for the grace this would bring, and he accepts that he himself is not able to stand as an equal before God - truly does he say that, "my intercessor is my friend". Job is, without fully realizing it\*\*, wrestling with one of the issues that is at the heart of the gospel.

\* In the better known Job 19:25, Job expresses the similar thought that, "I know that my Redeemer lives."

\*\* Commentators differ as to whether Job understands that God himself is his true intercessor, or whether Job expects such help from some other heavenly source. In most respects, this doesn't matter as much as Job's realization that an intercessor, not his own works or beliefs, is what will save him.

"(God) saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm achieved salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him" (Isaiah 59:16). God has always known, even during the centuries of Levitical law and even before then, that no human soul could stand before him by correct beliefs or good works. God has always wanted us to seek him by grace - and even more so now that our Messiah Jesus has atoned for sin once for all. God does not want us to nag each other or judge each other, but to encourage one another and to encourage unbelievers to accept his compassionate offer of salvation by grace.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why does Job feel that God has attacked him? How might God feel about Job saying these things? Can Job say them and still have faith? Why does Job want an intercessor? Who or what might he mean? What does this tell us about his relationship with God? How can Christians learn from Job's perspective?

### ***Open To Suggestions (Job 16:22-17:16)***

Although Job's language and tone have become more desperate and often more sarcastic, at the same time he remains fully open to anything that God might ask of him. If his thoughts seem muddled, it is because of his honest confusion in trying to establish clearer communication with God. Even his repeated longings for death are really an expression of deeper spiritual needs.

Although we can see that Job is on the verge of some crucial insights, at present he feels a growing sense of desperation, and thus he pleads with God to help him before it is too late (16:22-17:3). He feels that his days have been cut short - "the grave awaits me" - yet this does not make him self-centered or hateful. Rather, it makes him all the more determined to make sure to rectify whatever stands between himself and God. This is what he means by asking God what "pledge"\* he desires to see.

\* In Christ we know that this is a matter of grace, for the Holy Spirit is a deposit or pledge of God's grace to us - since there is no adequate pledge we can make to God to assure him of our perfection or sinlessness.

Job's perspective is again especially admirable because he cannot see the fulfillment in Christ of the spiritual needs he has so vigorously expressed. For all his confusion and despair, he sees some important things about the relationship between God and humanity that many Christians miss, despite having far more advantages than Job did. Job is willing to give God whatever he

wants - he simply knows that his friends don't have the right answer to this in their constant calls for him to conform to their human expectations.

And though Job is confused, it is an honest confusion; though he is depressed, it is a depression not based on self-centeredness but born of an acute understanding of our spiritual needs (17:4-9). Nothing makes sense to Job - and some of his thoughts in this passage are not fully coherent - but this is because he is looking for answers beneath the surface, and is unwilling to settle for the kinds of simple, pat answers that his friends are offering.

So Job says, with some irony, for his friends to "try again" (17:10-16). As exasperated as he is with their words, and though part of him wishes that they would just stop talking, Job is all the same quite willing to listen to any ideas that might possibly answer his questions. He feels that he is looking into the face of darkness, facing a hopeless situation on every side, and yet he will continue to be faithful to the end and will keep trying to understand.

Job's sarcasm reaches new depths, though, in his description of his new 'family' with the macabre imagery in verse 14. We cannot deny that at present Job is not a lot of fun to be around - yet all the same, he is much closer to giving God what he wants than his friends are, even though on the surface they say the right things and present a confident front.

Job is one of many examples that show us the difference between God's expectations and ours. God is not as interested as we are in what lies on the surface, but instead calls us to, "first clean the inside of the cup and the dish" (Matthew 23:26). Our outward actions and professed beliefs, however good they may look, can never provide a reliable foundation for knowing God.

To find solid ground that will last for eternity, to grasp the true nature of the love and grace that lie at the heart of God's relationship with us, there is sometimes no substitute for the questioning and wondering that Job is going through. None of us would want to spend our entire lives like this, but we don't need to - we just have to remind ourselves not to become too certain of our own beliefs; and we ought to be helpful and sensitive to those like Job who need deeper answers.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why does Job feel that he is so short of time? What kind of a 'pledge' does he think God wants? How would Jesus have fulfilled Job's needs? Why is Job so sarcastic? Does this say anything about his relationship with God? Do we know what God wants from Job right now? Has Job learned anything?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, March 2013*

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## **BORN TO TROUBLE: LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF JOB**

### **Notes For Week Six: God & The Wicked (Job 18-21)**

*In their constant efforts to demonstrate that Job's problems are the result of some sin that he has committed, his friends have strongly pushed their viewpoint that God will always punish sinful persons for their misdeeds. In the next series of speeches, this idea takes center stage. Though much of what they say is erroneous, Job's friends raise some questions that are worth examining.*

#### ***Instant Replay (Job 18)***

Bildad now returns, with an exposition of his certainty that God will always take decisive action against wrongdoers. He says nothing new; yet even though his views are misguided, they can nonetheless help us to re-examine our own. The mistaken belief that God hates the wicked and rejoices in their downfall is also a part of many Christians' perspectives.

So far, we have seen Job's suffering (Job 1-3), followed by an extended dialogue in which Job wants to discuss the big questions (Job 4-7), while his three friends are preoccupied with distinguishing the innocent from the guilty (Job 8-11). Job is hoping against hope that God will eventually help him to make sense of everything (Job 12-14). He and his friends also have contrasting views on what God wants (Job 15-17)\*.

\* The current dialogue will continue through Job 31. A new character, Elihu, will speak from Job 32-37; and then God will speak from Job 38-41, followed by an epilogue in Job 42.

Throughout all of this, all three of Job's friends have consistently stated that Job's sufferings must have been caused by some sin that he (or perhaps his children) committed; and so Bildad's latest comments are really on the same safe and familiar ground (Job 18:1-21). As Eliphaz has just done (in chapter 15), Bildad goes into detail on the many punishments that, he thinks, God devises for those who sin. To him this is a certainty, and so he reproaches Job for refusing to accept it. If there is any difference between him and Eliphaz, it is that Eliphaz speaks from (perceived) experience, whereas Bildad rests his certainty largely on theological formulas.

Bildad's views rest on several preconceptions. He assumes that God is angry over every misstep, and that God prefers punishment rather than repentance. He also believes in a sharp distinction between the good and the wicked - and he obviously sees himself among the former, with Job for now among the latter. Moreover, his entire view of God is mechanistic rather than personal.

When we consider God's views of (and relationship with) the wicked and the sinful, there are some questions worth considering even though they may complicate the process of reaching some final answers. Reconsidering Bildad's perspectives leads to questions such as how God really feels towards those who sin - and if sin does anger him, why exactly does it anger him.

The world is hardly as simple as Bildad wants it to be - so how do we explain so many prosperous sinners and suffering believers? It is OK to ask such questions, even when we don't know or get the answers - in asking them honestly, we allow God to teach us and to humble us.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why do all three of Job's friends feel so certain of their viewpoint? Is there anything true or useful about it? How does their belief in reward and punishment reflect on their views of God?

## *My Redeemer Lives (Job 19)*

Job does not yet reply directly to Bildad's speech (he will do so in chapter 21), but instead he first expresses his ongoing general despair at the inability of his friends to listen to him or to address his real needs. Yet even his troubled relationship with his friends leads him to the more important realization that God alone must be, and is, his true source of redemption and salvation.

Job's first response to Bildad is an expression of his continuing desolation (19:1-22). To his loss and suffering has been added the ongoing humiliation of seeing his private agony discussed clinically and impersonally. His children are dead, his wife does not understand why he remains faithful to God, and his friends won't give him the slightest pity (verse 21) because of their theological assumptions. He feels that he has beaten the odds just by surviving this long\*.

\* Verse 20 is the origin of the expression 'the skin of one's teeth' for someone who barely escapes harm. The original Hebrew actually suggests someone who emerges from trials having lost almost everything.

Yet Job forthrightly proclaims hope in his "redeemer\*" (19:23-29). He returns again to this idea (see also 16:19-21) as his best and living hope out of his difficulties. As always, his primary concern is not to be compensated for his suffering, but to be re-assured of God's presence and of God's goodness. Job's closeness to God comes through in his desire for a "redeemer" based on grace and compassion, rather than a judge to reward him for his good works. Without realizing it, he has anticipated some key aspects of the gospel, the "new and living way" (Hebrews 10:20).

\* The Hebrew word, sometimes translated as 'defender' or 'protector', is the word for the kinsman-redeemer of Levitical law. The best-known literal example is Boaz in the book of Ruth. In Job's use of the word, then, there is a sense of kinship and relationship combined with the function of redemption and salvation.

Job then ponders what might happen to him after his body has been destroyed. Though he has no theology or doctrine to clarify his feeling, Job has a strong sense that he will somehow personally see and be with God even after his death\*, whether in the body or out of the body\*\*. Job realizes that, at least on some level, there is an important part of him that goes beyond his physical body - and he also realizes that being with God and living in his presence is his most important need, a need that will transcend even the end of his earthly existence.

\* Most ancient Hebrews had a generic concept of an afterlife in Sheol, though for many years there was no formal doctrine about it. Job may have lived before Sheol was a standard concept, yet his strong sense of God's presence helped him see that God had put something in him that would persist after physical death.

\*\* The original text of verses 25-27 is complicated, and it can be rendered in English in several different ways. But it basically means one of two things: either Job knows that there is something about him that will survive physical death, or else he believes that God will somehow bring him back in a (the) body after death (compare Abraham's thoughts in Hebrews 11:19). Either way, Job has the same crucial awareness.

Job's central insight is that he sees the importance of God's presence, of being with God, of knowing God. This matters to him more than anything else, even in his darkest trials. And so what distresses him the most is his fear that God is not present right now, that God may have no idea how he feels. In this he is, of course, mistaken, but his very anxiety over this - which many believers would consider minor compared with earthly trials - shows his spiritual understanding.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why does Job feel humiliated? Can we tell yet what he means by his "redeemer"? Does it matter what or whom he expects to redeem him? How might Job have come to realize that this is what he needs? How might he have come to understand that he will have some kind of existence after death?

### ***What He Said (Job 20)***

Now Zophar, the moralist, speaks again. Yet he too can find little new to say. He returns to the same ideas that Eliphaz and Bildad have just discussed, emphasizing his own certainty that anyone wicked will surely receive swift punishment. Though they each have somewhat different approaches, all three friends are certain that Job's suffering has been caused by his sin.

Zophar's summary of their shared viewpoint is that "the mirth of the wicked is brief" (20:1-29). Like the other two, and unlike Job, he is not content to wait for some vaguely defined afterlife to see sin punished and goodness rewarded. If Zophar's take on the theme is at all different, it is in his vivid portrayal of sinners relishing the fruits of their ways. The moralist Zophar positively enjoys thinking about an evil person being happy one moment and suffering horribly the next.

All three are probably unaware of the implications of their assumption that the guilty are to be punished without question. Their 'God' is impersonal and unforgiving. Yet even today believers extol God's love one moment and condemn a sinner the next: "with the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come both praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be." (James 3:9-10)

So also, when we consider or reconsider our own beliefs, assumptions, and preconceptions, we often create a disconnect between the teachings we promote and the things they say about God. Any teaching that genuinely comes from God will reflect his own true nature and character, rather than our human concerns, agendas, or conventions.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Is there any difference between Zophar and Job's other two friends? What do his beliefs imply about God's nature and character? How can it help us to consider God's nature and character in examining our own beliefs? To what degree should this be a consideration?

### ***Faith & Reality (Job 21)***

Job will neither accept his friends' simplistic viewpoints nor give in completely to his own despair. He is eager - even desperate - to develop a perspective that combines his faith in God with an honest awareness of the harsh realities of life in this world. His friends still don't realize that Job's questions go far beyond the agony of his own present situation.

Though his perspective is distorted by his suffering, Job is very much living in the real world (21:1-16). He wonders what planet his friends are on where sin is always punished and good deeds always rewarded. Here on earth, evildoers sometimes bring about their own downfall - but they are often rewarded, too. Sometimes the kindhearted are commended, but often they are mistreated and exploited. Weeds often flourish and precious flowers are often trampled.

Job is not challenging God, but he does want to understand how God can allow so much injustice and sorrow when he could intervene if he wished to\*. Job's trials have made him more thoughtful and sensitive, not more selfish. Jesus, who knew very well what it was like to suffer unjustly, provides a New Testament perspective in the Parable Of The Weeds (Matthew 13:24-30, explained in 13:36-43). God is patient with wrongdoers even when humans are not.

\* Philosophers use the term "theodicy" to describe such discussions about why God does or does not act in human affairs, and whether (from a human viewpoint) his choices can be defended or explained.

Thus Job, like so many others before him and after him, wonders why God doesn't do something (21:17-21). He questions the sweeping assertions of his friends, asking them to consider how rarely things in the real world actually work out as simply as they think. Job also observes, correctly, that God more often allows us to see or experience the consequences of sin, rather than bringing direct divine punishment.

Yet this too raises new questions for Job. The consequences of sin (as opposed to punishment for sin) are often felt not by the sinners themselves, but by others around them. Job is particularly disturbed by the ways that an evildoer's sin can harm his or her family\* - once more, Job is asking for answers about problems his friends won't even consider. It takes only a small amount of effort to see how often innocent persons must pay the price for the sins of others.

\* Verse 19 is interesting because Job's question reveals that even at the time it was said that God would bring punishment on the sons of sinners. Later this would become a widespread misconception because of the misinterpretation of verses such as Exodus 20:5 and Deuteronomy 5:9. See also Ezekiel 18:1-20.

In all his questions, pain, and confusion, Job maintains a strong awareness of God's greater wisdom (21:22-34). When he speaks of the impossibility of teaching knowledge to God, he understands this more deeply than his friends do. They have emphasized God's superior wisdom in order to challenge Job to accept their own viewpoints, for they are unable to differentiate their own opinions from God's truth. Job says the same thing, but he means it more humbly. He can tell that his friends are wrong, yet he knows very well that he does not have the answers either.

And so Job still seeks an answer for why God so often allows humans to obtain worldly success or to gain profit by sinful means. The answer to this is simpler (though still just as unsettling) from a New Testament perspective. Jesus willingly associated with many persons classed as 'sinners' to show that he loved them and cared about them. He did not approve of their sins, but neither did he lecture them or punish them. He did not condemn them or require 'penance', but simply told them to, "leave your life of sin" (John 8:11). And so God also gives good things to everyone, because he created each soul and he loves each soul just as much as the next one.

Our own perspectives on sin and sinners are often based on moralism rather than on grace. Jesus' example can help us to avoid mistaking condemnation for righteousness, or confusing acceptance of others personally for approval of (or 'condoning') their sins. And he teaches us not to resent the good things that belong to those who sin, but instead simply to look with compassion on those who have less than us - for our own blessings have come equally by grace.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Is today's world different from Job's when it comes to the rewards, punishment, or consequences of sin? What aspects of this does Job see clearly? What aspects are easier to understand from a New Testament viewpoint? How did Jesus feel towards sinners? How did this affect his treatment of them?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, April 2013*

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## **BORN TO TROUBLE: LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF JOB**

### **Notes For Week Seven: Can A Man Be Righteous? (Job 22-25)**

*After presenting contrasting ideas on the relationship between God and the wicked, Job and his friends now discuss an opposite question: is it possible for a mortal human to be righteous in God's eyes? Just as each of us is weak and prone to making mistakes, so also the world we live in can become so complicated that we often cannot even know with certainty what is best.*

#### ***Some New Considerations (Job 22)***

This time, Eliphaz actually has something new to add to the discussion. When Eliphaz accuses Job of some specific shortcomings, we cannot know how much truth there is to them; yet his remarks give us cause to think even if they are only partially true. His observations teach us a more general lesson - in this world it is just not possible for anyone to do everything perfectly.

For the first time, instead of simply saying that Job must be guilty of some undefined offense, Eliphaz details Job's alleged faults, imperfections, and offenses (22:1-11). We have no way of knowing whether Eliphaz's specific accusations are true or untrue - and to a large degree it does not matter, as there is a broader truth that is worth considering. In pointing out ways that Job has often (according to Eliphaz) failed to use his former wealth for good purposes, Eliphaz touches on some general truths that are more important than the immediate situation.

\* Some of the things Eliphaz accuses Job of doing would later be covered in the Levitical law. For example, Exodus 22:25-27 and Deuteronomy 24:10-13 prohibits taking a poorer person's clothes or personal items as pledge (*i.e.* collateral) for a loan, as Eliphaz accuses Job of doing in verse 6 here.

Life is complicated for those who want to do the right thing. For a man like Job with both wealth and faith, it is essentially impossible always to use money and personal property in an unselfish way. While Eliphaz's portrait of Job as a selfish miser is almost certainly untrue or at least exaggerated, it is still true that anyone wealthy - such as the large majority of Americans - has untold opportunities to use material possessions to help others, of which even the most generous make use of only a fraction. And this is only one of a great many such examples.

Complicated questions arise when we try to do the right thing in ministry, in caring for the natural world, in our involvement in earthly affairs, and the like. Some basic spiritual qualities like honesty, compassion, kindness, and responsibility are always right. Yet in the real world, it is impossible to meet every need or to make use of every opportunity to serve. Many apparently good actions have unintended consequences. Often situations involve two different positive values in conflict with each other. The solution is not to devise a mythical system of morality that answers every question, but instead to live by grace, acknowledging that both others and ourselves all need abundant grace to cover our imperfect actions and understanding.

So Eliphaz is actually raising some valid ideas - and yet he quickly goes back to the tired old theme of God always punishing the wicked swiftly (22:12-20). He repeats the same obligatory formula, implying once more that Job is being rebellious in not accepting it. Yet this time he includes a worthwhile thought, in his admonition that God himself gave even the wicked the good things that they temporarily enjoy. Even if he doesn't realize the implications, Eliphaz is able to see that God does give good gifts to us all (see Matthew 5:45, Acts 14:16-17).

Perhaps even more importantly, for the first time Eliphaz seems to allow some room for grace (22:21-30). Although much of what he says is formulaic (Job needs to "return to God"), he does discuss Job's relationship with God more personally. He talks about finding delight in God, and of Job lifting up his face to God, instead of merely promising material rewards for obedience. And he adds an even more surprising note at the end, in describing the possibility that Job himself may prove to be an intercessor for other sinners. Perhaps Eliphaz is confused about some of these things, and he has opened the door to grace by a tiny crack, yet this is a good sign.

Discussions For Discussion Or Study: Does it matter whether Job is guilty of the offenses Eliphaz accuses him of? What broader principles might this illustrate? What other new elements are there in Eliphaz's speech this time? Do they illustrate a real change of perspective? Should this matter to us?

### ***Where Is God? (Job 23)***

Job does not dispute any of Eliphaz's specific accusations. At the moment, Job is much less concerned with his guilt or innocence than he is with his feeling that God is not present with him. If he must defend himself, he would rather do it before God. If he is going to have a chance to explain his feelings, then he would greatly prefer that God, not merely humans, be listening.

Job again expresses his central desire, "if only I could go to his dwelling" (23:1-7). He is convinced that God's presence\*, which he simply cannot sense right now, would bring peace and grace. He sees God as a judge on one hand but a redeemer on the other, the source of his problems but also the source of his hope. Even though he cannot resolve these questions, he still knows that if he is to find lasting comfort, it must come from closeness with God above all else.

\* It is quite common for commentators on Job to fasten their attention on his occasional statements about his "case" (e.g. in verse 4) and to imagine that Job is still demanding some kind of formal or legal hearing about what has happened to him. Indeed, this is the way that many persons would act. But the overall context of Job's discourses presents the much different picture of a soul longing for spiritual comfort.

Job fears that God might be deliberately avoiding him, since God certainly knows where Job lives and could find him if he wished to (23:8-12). This is not so much a reproach of God as an expression of Job's ongoing bewilderment. Later, Job will fully realize how wrong it was to think that God had ever left him\*, but right now this is his major worry. Yet even the fact that God's perceived absence troubles Job is a sign of his genuine faith and his desire to be with God.

\* This is in fact the lesson of God's speech in Job 38-41; he is not rebuking Job for asking questions but rather assuring Job that he is always present and always knows everything. When Job says that he will "repent in ashes" (Job 42:6), it is for doubting God's presence and concern. Regarding the things he said about God, God himself tells the others that Job spoke truthfully while they did not (Job 42:7-8).

Job is also willing to accept that God does as he pleases (23:13-17). Given what he has endured, his willingness to accept this is commendable; and in the sense Job means it, God does have the ability to do what he wills. But is it really true that God can do whatever he wishes to? We often say this, but it is in fact incorrect. God cannot sin, cannot lie, cannot be tempted, cannot die, and many other such things.

And, apropos of Job's situation, God cannot act in contradiction to his own nature. In particular, he will not withdraw himself from someone seeking him. It is understandable that Job did not think this far; but if he had, he would never have doubted God's presence and concern. Once more we see that an understanding of God's nature and character can clarify confusing matters.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why doesn't Job directly answer Eliphaz's accusations? Do Job's words connect with them at all? Why would he prefer for God, rather than other persons, to evaluate him? Are there others reasons for his desire to be in God's presence? Does Job know why he cannot sense God's presence right now?

### ***An Agonizing Delay (Job 24)***

To Job's difficulty in sensing God's presence is added his sense of justice being long postponed. Many of Job's feelings express things Christians also sometimes feel, as we try to live out our lives as faithfully as we can in a world that is full of ungodliness and unbelief. Like us, Job is distressed at the thought that he may have to wait indefinitely for some of the answers he seeks.

Troubled by his deepened awareness of the injustice and suffering in the world, Job wonders why God does not set some kind of deadline date for settling accounts with the wrongdoers of the world (24:1-12). While we can easily answer this theologically, Job's concern is still understandable. His distress at the effects of sin also reminds us why sin is bad in the first place. God did not create laws in order to restrict us or even to test our obedience - rather, he tells us certain things are sin because they are harmful to ourselves, to others, or to our relationships.

Job's poignant depiction of the suffering of the poor and the oppressed calls us to rise above trivialized or academic views of sins like materialism and greed. Yet neither is it Job's intent to rouse us to anger at those who have caused such innocent suffering. He has learned, through his own suffering\*, that life can be very difficult, for reasons that we often cannot control. Job openly wonders why God does not step in to prevent all the unjust suffering; yet when he calls for punishment for the oppressors he is really, rather, pleading for relief for his fellow sufferers.

\* Hebrews says about Jesus himself: "although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" (Hebrews 5:8-9).

Like many others before and after him, Job sees how easily humans can turn God's grace into a license to sin (24:13-17). In Jesus, it is easier to see that God delays judgment because he does love "sinners" just as much as he loves the righteous - yet even Christians are notorious for their reluctance to proclaim God's grace fully and clearly, because "they might take it the wrong way."

The apostle Paul himself was frequently accused of teaching 'cheap grace', of teaching "let us sin so that grace may increase" - but Paul was never accused of legalism, because the real gospel is so far from legalism that no one hearing it will ever think so.

As for those whose greed or other sin causes harm to others, Job realizes that in the long run they are mere foam on the water (24:18-25). His understanding of this world has gone to a much deeper level as a result of his recent experiences. The temporary nature of everything in this life has helped him see that both the righteous and the wicked - to the degree that these concepts mean anything - will both soon enough pass away from their material existence. And thus it is imperative to seek meaning on a more permanent level.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What is the origin of Job's new concern for the poor? What can we learn from this? Does he understand yet why God does not punish those who have harmed others? Do we know why ourselves? Is it possible for believers to teach and practice grace without indulging sin? Do Job's thoughts help us with this?

### ***Bildad Signs Off (Job 25)***

The brief speech in this chapter is the last we shall hear from Bildad - in fact, this is the last time that any of Job's three friends will speak\* in the book. This time, Bildad does not reproach Job; he does not express any further frustration with Job and he no longer pushes his viewpoints. His closing words are brief and a bit enigmatic - has Bildad finally learned something?

\* Some commentators are so caught up in the literary structure of Job that they do not want to accept Bildad's brief speech as his final words. Likewise, they often do not like the fact that Zophar does not speak for a third time. Instead of accepting the book the way it is, some such commentators like to re-assign portions of Job's speech in Job 26-31 to Bildad and Zophar, to make things more "symmetrical".

Bildad echoes the thoughts of both Job and Eliphaz in his remarks about dominion and awe belonging to God (25:1-6). And for once he refrains from any direct criticism of Job - his words here take on a more thoughtful and detached tone. He poses the question, "how then can a man be righteous?" - but this time he is content to leave it at that\* - and indeed this is the last we shall hear from any of Job's three friends\*\*. He is probably overly certain that he knows the implications of this, but at least he has learned not to tread endlessly over the same ground.

\* See note above on the shortness of Bildad's final speech.

\*\* Although another bystander, Elihu, will speak in Job 32-37.

Human life is complicated, for the faithful as well as for the faithless. "None of us lives to himself alone, and none of us dies to himself alone" (Romans 14:7); our actions are inextricably intertwined, and it is often impossible to make definitive evaluations of right and wrong from our mortal perspective. God alone can see everything of importance. All the analysis of Job's friends neither meets his immediate needs nor solves any of the world's larger problems.

Instead of treating the gospel and our ministry as a contest to find all the answers or to produce the best outward results, we ought instead to pursue the spiritual fruit - humility, grace, compassion and the other fruits of the spirit - that we know are always in season, and against which there is never any law. No level of human righteousness can bring salvation, for indeed "all your righteous acts are like filthy rags" (Isaiah 64:6); but God simply calls us to come and allow him cleanse us with the blood of Jesus.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Can we tell whether Bildad has changed at all? Are there any differences between his latest thoughts and his earlier speeches? What general lessons about sin and righteousness can we learn from the book of Job so far?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, April 2013*

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## **BORN TO TROUBLE: LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF JOB**

### **Notes For Week Eight: Where Does Understanding Dwell? (Job 26-28)**

*As Job's troubled mind continues to think through the things he knows about God, the losses he has endured, and the wordy assertions of his friends, things slowly come into focus. As Job begins his last discourse of the book, he alternates between increasingly sharp comments about his friends and increasingly profound observations about God's majesty and wisdom.*

#### ***How Little We Know Of God (Job 26)***

By now, Job is completely dissatisfied with his friends' attempts to enlighten him; yet he is also beginning to realize just how little he himself understands of God. For the moment he remains uncertain whether God's overwhelming supremacy is a good thing or a bad thing, yet he is developing a profound sense of just how vast and transcendent God truly is.

Job's frustration with his friends continues to come out as he sarcastically 'thanks' his friends for having nothing of value to say (26:1-4). Job feels powerless in the face of recent events, while his friends are thoughtless. Yet, though they certainly have let him down in much of what they have said, Eliphaz and Bildad did make small steps forward in their most recent speeches\*. So any unfairness in his latest words merely reflects Job's accumulated discouragement.

\* See last week's notes on Eliphaz's final speech in Job 22 and Bildad's final speech in Job 25.

Job is starting to realize that even the most faithful human can perceive just a faint whisper of God while we are in this perishable world (26:5-14). Yet this is hardly because God is not present, nor is it because his influence is limited. Indeed death itself (in Hebrew, Sheol\*) is uncovered before God - that is, it holds no mystery to God and offers no challenge to God. "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account" (Hebrews 4:13).

\* Sheol is actually the Hebrew name for the realm or abode of the dead, rather than "death" itself. The word translated "destruction" is the Hebrew "Abaddon", which actually means something closer to 'annihilation' or 'nothingness'. In Job's lifetime, they were vaguely parallel to 'heaven' and 'hell'.

Though God's hand is always at work in our world, we must look for it and must be perceptive if we wish to appreciate its full significance. It is not only atheists who can be oblivious to the testimony of Creation. God deliberately takes a restrained and subtle approach, not forcing himself or his ways on anyone. At times his wonders are right in front of us, yet they are not what the human mind would look for. He has also displayed his power in distant places like the universe and the depths of the oceans\*, where they are there for those who look for them.

\* In verse 12, "Rahab" is a mythical sea-monster widely referred to in ancient literature of the region. The verse emphasizes God's absolute power over even the most terrifying of earthly beasts. The character "Rahab" in the book of Joshua was most likely named after the mythical Rahab.

Yet even the most perceptive humans can see just the outer fringe of his work. Nothing in our physical, perishable universe can ever supply more than a small glimpse of God's full power, majesty and wisdom. Job ponders the implications of this because it helps him to put things in perspective. At the moment, he mainly sees this as an explanation of why God apparently has so little interest in Job's problem. Yet it also shows Job's deep faith in God himself; for even when God seems absent, Job willingly celebrates God's transcendent qualities.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Is there any consistency between Job's comments about his friends and his observations about God? What aspects of Creation are most important to Job right now? Why does he think that we can only see the fringe of God's work? Would his understanding of this differ from ours?

### ***A Last Outburst Of Pain (Job 27)***

Job abruptly switches from sublime observations about God's transcendence to a harsh, sarcastic statement about his sufferings and his friends' inability to comfort him. His fear and despair at God's (perceived) absence come out in bitterness, and he parodies his friends' views with an odd combination of sarcasm and literary skill. Yet Job is just on the verge of some key insights.

Job suddenly expresses a firm determination not to be persuaded by his friends (27:1-6). He bluntly re-affirms his belief that God has not given him justice, yet he simultaneously affirms his faith and his determination not to wander from the truth. He also emphasizes his refusal to accept his friends' perspectives on what has happened to him. Is he maintaining his integrity, as he states in verse 5, or merely being stubborn?

Job's current mindset combines a mixture of both qualities. But perhaps his most significant statement is his insistence on maintaining a clear conscience. He will neither speak nor act in contradiction with his true beliefs and his best understanding. At times, his policies have led him to misunderstand some things, but at the same time his search for truth and his refusal to accept pat answers have led him to some key realizations about God that others would not find.

Job's steel is combined with bile in his denunciation of his "enemies" (27:7-12). In speaking thus of his friends, it is impossible to tell whether he has momentarily given in to his emotions and really thinks of them as enemies, or whether he is simply letting them know what it feels like to have one's friend render harsh judgment instead of comfort. In either case, Job reverses their curses, by proclaiming what will happen to them for their own disregard of God's nature.

Job goes even further as he parodies his friends' views\* (27:13-23). He, too, can come up with an assortment of images to represent the alleged swiftness and thoroughness with which God can punish evildoers. But Job is also implicitly reminding his friends that, in their emphasis on total obedience to God, they have also condemned themselves. Over-eagerness to condemn, even the truly sinful, is always spiritually hazardous. "At whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things." (Romans 2:1)

\* Some commentators miss the point of Job's discourse, and imagine that this part of it must actually have been made by Bildad or Zophar - they simply presume that the book was improperly edited at some point.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: In what situations might we develop the same kind of attitude that Job has here? Is this good or bad? Is he right or wrong to curse his friends and parody their views? What can we learn from his attitudes in these chapters?

### ***The Search For Wisdom (Job 28)***

Having released his bitterness, Job moves on to one of the book's most reflective and insightful passages. Millennia later, it remains one of the simplest yet most truthful statements about humanity's never-ending search for wisdom and knowledge. Even as Job has expressed his frustration with God's inaction, he has been developing a much closer understanding of God.

In vivid images, Job describes humanity's endless search for something of importance (28:1-11). He describes the feverish search for the earth's hidden treasures through mining, excavation and exploration\*. Even when humans find gold, silver, iron, and other valuable materials, they are not satisfied and they feel compelled to keep looking for more.

\* In Job's lifetime, this process of exploring and exploiting the earth's natural resources was at a far more rudimentary stage, and yet his description could equally well describe the similar activities of our own day, as humanity frantically tries to keep up with its own ever-increasing appetites.

All of nature, of course, seeks what it needs, but humans go much farther than any of the animals do. Perhaps it is not possible to define the difference precisely, but the process Job describes goes far beyond any animal's resourcefulness in using natural resources. It is a characteristic of humans to seek for seeking's sake, to desire for desire's sake, rather than staying within our natural needs as animals do. This is both good and bad - in some ways it reflects the nature of God himself, who desires to have meaning beyond his own existence; while at other times our worship of our own desires leads us into all kinds of sins.

Job is fascinated with the perpetual search for something of meaning. All our seeking - whether we seek pleasure or wisdom or wealth or fame or popularity or anything else tangible or intangible - reflects the incompleteness of humans in mortal form. To be lastingly content, we need to find something that transcends our physical earthly existence. Because Job has realized this, he is seeking spiritual wisdom and understanding\*.

\* Large portions of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes deal with similar questions, from different starting points. Proverbs - written in large part by Solomon when he was young - is an optimistic and positive look at how God's spiritual perspectives can provide wise guidance for daily living. Ecclesiastes, by contrast (and usually understood to be written by a much older Solomon) contains the thoughts of a man who used to be very close to God, but who drifted away from God because he sought another kind of meaning for his life.

And wisdom, like most things of lasting value, is not for sale (28:12-19). Job sees that human ingenuity can eventually find a way to fill many of our earthly desires, but true understanding is far more elusive: "But where can wisdom be found? Where does understanding dwell?"\* Job now realizes that something was always lacking, even when he seemingly had everything he needed. His trials, along with the complete inadequacy of human wisdom that they have exposed, have helped him to see the need to put his faith in God and God's wisdom alone.

\* This 'refrain' is stated in slightly different terms in verses 12 and 20, as Job's thoughts move from trying to find wisdom itself to trying to understand the true source of wisdom.

Though earthly riches can be found by those who seek them hard enough and selfishly enough, they are wholly inadequate to provide lasting meaning. There is no price tag on spiritual wisdom, just as there is no price tag on genuine love, humility, grace, or faith. Here is another reason why the genuine gospel will always be at odds with any earthly ideology, because the values of the gospel refuse to be bought or earned by any earthly means.

Although Job's mind is still very clouded, he is starting to sense God's perspective (28:20-28). He again pronounces his refrain of wondering aloud where wisdom comes from. He can see that neither humans nor their activities nor animals - not even the high-soaring birds - can see God directly or can find the source of true understanding. Gaining true wisdom is not a matter of earning it, of finding a secret source of knowledge, or of amassing facts and figures.

Philosophers use the term "epistemology" to describe discussions of the nature and source of knowledge\*. The two basic extremes of thought have sometimes been presented as (on one hand) a pyramid, built carefully layer by layer on a thoroughly reliable foundation, and (on the other hand) a boat, which holds together seamlessly in itself yet must 'float' on something external and uncertain.

\* Plato and Descartes are especially notable in this area of discussion. Plato's 'cave illustration' paralleled our knowledge of the universe to a group of persons in a cave, with the 'real world' behind them - all they can see is the shadows on the cave wall cast by 'true' events and objects that they cannot see. Descartes pursued the extremes to which any of our knowledge can be seen to be uncertain and possibly deceptive, settling on the famous phrase "I think, therefore I am" as the one fact that we can know without question.

God understands the way to wisdom, "and he alone knows where it dwells." As Job's imagery emphasizes, God can see it all, in our universe and in his own more lasting dwelling place. By nature of being mortal, human scientists and philosophers will never obtain more than a tiny fraction of the knowledge of the universe. No human, whether scientist or preacher, ever has anything resembling a truly objective attitude or a fully rational basis for reasoning. There is no shame in acknowledging this, and there is no wisdom in denying it.

God's wisdom is tested and confirmed, not only by his omniscient mind but also by his gracious character. Job's trials have helped him to see this, although at present he is unfulfilled in his desire for God's guidance because of his struggle to find God's presence amidst his sufferings. Yet he can still anticipate the conclusions of Ecclesiastes many centuries later: "the fear of the Lord - that is wisdom" (compare verse 28 with Ecclesiastes 12:13-14\*).

\* See also the earlier note (2nd footnote in the notes to this chapter) on Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, and Job.

Job is hardly being simplistic - he knows he has only found a reliable starting point. Yet simply knowing how to recognize false forms of fleshly wisdom, and simply being able to distinguish human wisdom (even - perhaps especially - when it comes in religious wrappings) from genuine godly wisdom, is a big step forward.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why does Job use the search for natural resources as a parallel to the search for wisdom? What other parallels would be appropriate? What does Job mean by wisdom and understanding? Why does he say that it cannot be purchased? What reasons does he give for God being the true source of wisdom? What does he mean by the "fear of the Lord", and why is it wise?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, April 2013*

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## **BORN TO TROUBLE: LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF JOB**

### **Notes For Week Nine: Past, Present, & Future (Job 29-31)**

*Job's closing remarks are much more straightforward than his earlier discourses, yet in their own way they still raise some significant questions. Job looks back at the way his life used to be, laments his present state of pain and humiliation, and then makes a ringing appeal to God. Some of his remarks are probably oversimplified, yet as always he has some important thoughts.*

#### ***A Blessed Life (Job 29)***

It is likely that Job appreciates his former blessings now more than he did when he had them. He describes his past life as not only full of material blessing and prosperity, but also as marked by honor and spiritual respect. He may be idealizing on some points, but his basic perception matches what we already knew about Job. If he is missing something, it is a more subtle point.

It is easy to sympathize with Job's lament, "how I long for the months gone by" (29:1-6). Tough times tend to make us think about better days, and at such times it is human nature to look backwards longingly instead of finding hope for the future. Yet even in his morose lament, Job maintains a spiritual focus. The first thing Job misses (he thinks) is God's intimate friendship. And he acknowledges that all his other blessings came because God was watching over him.

Job uses the image of streams of olive oil to describe the steady flow of blessings he used to experience. Olive oil symbolized nourishment, and when possessed in abundance it meant prosperity. Likewise, the image of a "path drenched with cream\*" anticipates the description of the Promised Land of Canaan as "a land flowing with milk and honey", that is, an abundance not only of what was needed but also of many comforts and pleasures as well.

\* The Hebrew word has also been translated as "curds", which was then an important staple - in that case, the image would merely symbolize an abundance of basic things, rather than also implying extra blessings.

But there was far more to Job's past life, since he willingly accepted the spiritual responsibility that came with who he was and what he had (29:7-17). He was a public example, known and respected for his fair treatment of his others and apparently for his wise counsel as well. He got this reputation not for performing sacrifices and rituals, but by being active in caring for human needs. The poor, the disabled, and strangers\* all benefitted from Job's thoughtfulness.

\* Later in Israel's history, responsibility towards these kinds of needs would become part of the law. Job, though, probably lived well before this was the case, and he looked after such persons' needs voluntarily. Further, even when the laws took effect they were often ignored or explained away.

During his good days, Job had certain expectations of the future that have since been crushed (29:18-25). There was no reason for him to think that all of his life would be pleasurable, as long as he continued to conduct himself in a godly manner. Yet he has now learned how merciless the world can be, and how quickly things can take a turn for the worse. "What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes." (James 4:14)

Job's experience can help us to improve our perspective on the good times in our own lives. We too tend to think that things will always - or should always - stay as they are. We try to control or change our surroundings, and we are surprised by genuine change, especially when it is bad. Worse, we never truly appreciate the good things we have, because we are obsessed with making

our lives even more perfect. All this is just human nature. The godly alternative is to realize that the only thing we can really manage is our emotional and spiritual response to such upheavals.

Neither good things nor bad things last forever. Instead of worrying or fretting about this, we should accept the good times for what they are. There is never anything wrong with enjoying and appreciating the blessings God gives us. We should simply remember that we did nothing to deserve them, and that they are given us to teach us about God's love and for us to share with others, not to hoard them for ourselves or begrudge others who have other things that we desire.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Does Job's view of his past seem realistic? If not, would this change the lessons we can get from it? What does Job teach us about the ways we view our own past? What does he teach us about looking at our blessings and good times in the way that God wishes us to?

### *A Cursed Existence (Job 30)*

But this blessed life is now gone, and Job's present existence is filled with misery of every kind. He is distressed that even outcasts and troublemakers look down on him; and it pains him that no one seems to understand. Most of all, he is distressed that God seems unwilling to answer him, so that he doesn't even know for certain whether God is aware of all that is going on.

Being mocked by the disreputable elements\* of society makes Job feel especially disgraced (30:1-15). It hurts him enough to be misunderstood and misadvised by his own friends, but knowing that even the dregs of society look down on him brings complete humiliation. He feels deprived of all safety, dignity, and security; and even those who ought to understand his situation have, seemingly, turned against him.

\* The description in the text would refer to those persons who, either because they were criminals or because they had made themselves unpopular, had been driven out of regularly established settlements. In Job's lifetime, small and sometimes dangerous groups of such outcasts were relatively common.

Job is experiencing human nature at its worst; and his story reminds us of how little human nature ever changes, even when the trappings of society are transformed. In every era, humans rejoice in the fall of someone famous and powerful, without regard to whether they were once considered 'good' or 'bad'. Further, those who are dissatisfied with their own lives always enjoy misfortunes or disasters in the lives of others, for it gives them the chance to analyze and critique someone else's actions, instead of taking responsibility for their own.

None of this helps Job, of course, and he just cannot get his thoughts on a positive track - "the churning inside me never stops" (30:16-31). Even for the faithful, there are times when the mortal mind is too overloaded with anxiety or sorrow to be able to respond to spiritual principles that we know are true. At such times, we need the spiritual comfort of others; but when Job has looked for a source of light, he has instead found darkness. His own friends are telling him that he must deserve his enormous losses, and he is also still enduring great physical suffering\*.

\* Commentators often use verses 28 and 30 as clues to deduce the specific nature of Job's physical ailment (most commentaries in the class bibliography detail these ideas). It is also possible, though, that these verses are figurative expressions of Job's feelings, rather than literal descriptions of his physical illness.

All this can also give us perspective on the bad things and bad times in our lives. These are just as transitory as the good times, yet we find it equally difficult to see this. Human nature is to

seek blame and punishment for the bad things that happen; yet God's call is for us instead to learn from them, and especially to draw closer to him during the tough times.

Moreover, like Job we can use them to develop a much deeper empathy for those whose lives contain even more fear and sorrow than ours do. "If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer." (2 Corinthians 1:6)

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Can we tell how accurate Job's perceptions are of the ways that others are treating him? If they are inaccurate, would it change the lessons we can get from his thoughts? How does Job help us develop perspective on difficult times? How can it help us to be more helpful to others who are suffering?

### *A Direct Appeal (Job 31)*

After summing up the stark contrast between past and present, Job chooses to take decisive action. He makes an extended appeal directly to God, calling for God to indicate whether Job has lived righteously or sinfully. In his time and place, this gesture carried added meaning, and might have been seen as quite risky. Yet even at face value we can easily see its significance.

In a sudden shift, Job proclaims his innocence in startlingly bold terms (31:1-34, 38-40). Before considering specific claims, an overview of his appeal and its general significance raises several important ideas. For the most part, the chapter follows a consistent structure: Job says, "if I have" committed a particular offense, then let God render an appropriate punishment\* upon him.

\* In some cases, Job calls for the possible natural consequences of some of these sins, but the main emphasis is on the appropriate nature (that is, the "poetic justice") of the corresponding punishment.

In its historical context, Job's appeal held a specific meaning. With a much more informal legal system, a direct verbal appeal to God then held more importance to observers than it would today. In the culture of Job's time, only someone quite confident of his or her innocence would have made the kinds of claims and announcements of readiness to accept punishment that Job makes here. It was unlikely for anyone to make a speech like this as a mere rhetorical gesture.

The full original significance of Job's words may not be the same now, but his appeal has a lasting spiritual significance. Throughout his ordeal, Job has consistently remained aware that God's judgment is all that truly matters; and this statement is his strongest such assertion yet. While it is not necessary for us to imitate the outward form of his appeal, we can still benefit spiritually from emulating his basic perspective. Far too many Christians put their faith in outmoded human doctrines, rituals, and theologies instead of the timeless truths of the gospel.

In themselves alone, Job's claims of innocence are extensive and significant. He has tried to live in purity by making "a covenant with my eyes" (v. 1-4, 9-12), and has pledged to live free of dishonesty in his dealings with others (v. 5-8). He has sought to give justice\* to servants and the poor\*\* (v. 13-23, 38-40), and has striven to avoid materialism and other forms of idolatry (v. 24-28). He has done all he can to clear his heart of malice and deceit (v. 29-34).

\* As usual in Scripture, 'justice' does not refer to punishment - it means to give everyone an equal chance.

\*\* Notice the contrast and the frequent contradictions with Eliphaz's comments in Job 22:4-11. In order to determine the relative truth of these characterizations, we have to consider the book of Job as a whole.

Even aside from the question of how true they are, these claims of innocence also tell us Job's concept of what God desires from his life. He does not mention the accuracy of his beliefs or the correctness of his ritual observance, but instead emphasizes the ways that he has used his understanding of God in his attitudes towards and treatment of others. To Job, there is no distinction between his beliefs about God's nature and the way he lives his life.

So Job is now ready to be judged, as long as it is by God and not by unworthy, self-appointed human authorities (31:35-37). By no means does Job think he is without fault, and he is not even fully taking God's grace into account, but he knows that God will certainly look past the minutia in order to see the whole of Job's life. When Job calls out "let the Almighty answer", we see again that he cannot yet perceive that God is still present. But we can also see his confidence in God - like David, he can say, "Let us fall into the hands of the Lord, for his mercy is great; but do not let me fall into the hands of men." (2 Samuel 24:14)

This too is why Job is unafraid of human accusers. He does not hate them or have contempt for them, but he realizes how meaningless all human standards of judgment are - including his own. And this has only changed for the worse in the millennia since Job walked the earth. The follower of Jesus should be able to say that, "I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me" (1 Corinthians 4:3-4). And God will do so by grace.

With this appeal, "the words of Job are ended"; and he now remains silent as he waits for God to answer\*, whether by speech or by action. Despite so many other concerns, Job has sought God's presence above all. He is willing to answer for anything before God, to listen to anything that God says, to accept anything that comes from God. Humans can do many things for one another (indeed, much of what Job himself has done has made God's presence known to others) but in life's crucial moments there is no substitute for knowing God and being aware that he is with us.

\* In its historical and cultural setting, Job's direct appeal to God would have elicited considerable attention from those who witnessed it and expected some kind of response. Commentators often point out that it is deliberate on God's part not to answer immediately, as this emphasizes that God is under no obligation to answer at all if he does not wish to.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What would have motivated Job to make this firm appeal to God? Does its historical context change the way we should apply it? What does it show about Job's current perspective? How can we put this into practice? What overall lessons can we learn from the things Job has said throughout the book?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, April 2013*

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## **BORN TO TROUBLE: LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF JOB**

### **Notes For Week Ten: The Voice Of Youth (Job 32-37)**

*Between Job's final remarks and God's famous reply, there is an extended interlude as we hear from a new character, a young man named Elihu. Younger than the others who have tried to persuade Job of his sin, Elihu has waited until they no longer have anything more to say. Elihu rehashes much of the same ground, but adds a few thoughts of his own - some wise, some foolish.*

#### ***Listen Up, Job! (Job 32-33)***

Elihu comes on pretty strong right from the start. He is just as certain as the others are that Job is entirely wrong in what he says about God, but he is equally irritated with Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar for not being able to convince Job of his sinfulness. After sitting silently for so long, Elihu uses a good deal of time in merely emphasizing how important his speech will be.

Elihu emphasizes (and re-emphasizes) that he feels compelled to speak because he does not hear anyone else who is saying the right things (32:1-22). He expresses sharp disappointment that he, rather than his older colleagues, needs to be the one to 'set things straight'. We can and should give him credit for patiently listening to all of the previous discourses\*. At the same time, we can see in Elihu an inability to allow any significant grace to those who do not share his views.

\* It is not clear how long Elihu has been present, since he is not mentioned previously in the book. But it seems clear that he has listened to most or all of the preceding dialogues.

One thing about Elihu is that, whereas God explicitly says that Job has spoken correctly about him while Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar were wrong (Job 42:7-8), God never renders an evaluation about Elihu's discourse. So we have to evaluate his words in the context of the other statements, true and false, in Job. In his perspectives, the younger Elihu combines many of the familiar banal orthodoxies with some observations of his own - some worthwhile and some foolish. Perhaps God merely shows some grace to the younger speaker by not critiquing all of his views.

In his wordy introductory thoughts - in 33:2 he says that he is 'about to' open his mouth when he has already been talking for a whole chapter - Elihu puts himself on a fully equal standing with the others (33:1-7). "I am just like you before God; I too have been taken from clay." As Paul told Timothy, "don't let anyone look down on you because you are young" (1 Timothy 4:12). Elihu claims to be sincere, and he does have a few original thoughts. Yet neither confidence nor sincerity guarantees correctness - and he is also quite long-winded, apparently feeling that after waiting for so long, he is entitled to enjoy listening to himself speak for a while\*.

\* Commentators often note that Elihu's verbosity provides a lengthy break between Job's last speech and God's final reply, increasing the dramatic tension while emphasizing God's right to reply on his own terms.

The weaknesses in Elihu's approach are shown in his inability to gauge the context of Job's remarks, and in his own preconceptions (33:8-22). He treads a lot of familiar ground, assuming that Job's trials must be the result of some wrongdoing\*, thinking that God is angered by Job's feeling that God has left him, and believing that God dispenses instant punishments and rewards.

\* Some commentators see in Elihu's words a belief that Job's 'punishment' may have been for some intended sin, rather than one he had already committed. This may also be implied in 36:16 (see below).

Yet he also offers a glimpse of light (33:23-33). Unlike the other three friends, but like Job, Elihu sees the value of mediation between God and humanity; and he allows for the possibility that it could come via an angel. He also appreciates the value of redemption for those who sin - though his beliefs on this in practice are inconsistent, and sometimes contradictory. It should not be a surprise that a young man like Elihu would demonstrate such a mixture of qualities.

More important than his specific beliefs is the way that Elihu's example reminds us that we all must undergo a lifelong process of slowly learning the truth about God. It is less important to be right than to be humble, and it is less of a problem to be wrong than to be too sure of ourselves.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What does it say about Elihu that he takes so long to start saying anything? What differences and similarities with the other three friends' views can we see so far? Which of these may be the result of Elihu being younger?

### ***Defending God (Job 34)***

We soon find out that Elihu is motivated in large part by a feeling that he must 'defend' God against Job's 'accusations'. Although Elihu is willing to consider some aspects of the situation that the older observers are not, he still is guided by his own significant preconceptions, and thus he is unable to understand Job's honest search for truth. There are some lessons in this for us.

Because he misunderstands Job's perspective, Elihu emphasizes how "unthinkable" (NIV, v.12) it is that God could do anything wrong (34:1-20). He harshly says Job drinks "scorn like water", because he cannot understand or accept that it is fully possible to love and respect God while still agonizing over what God does or does not do. Job's understanding of God and appreciation for God are much deeper than any of the others', yet they do not see this due to their preconceptions.

Elihu's unnecessary 'defense' of God parallels our own overreactions to events and folly around us. The world's controversies, debates, and competitions have little or no spiritual meaning, yet many Christians think it more important to express their fleshly opinions, coated with a thin layer of religion, than to demonstrate grace, peace, and spiritual fruit that matter more to God. God himself lovingly allows a great deal of folly and blasphemy to pass unpunished and uncorrected.

Elihu is also sure that certain punishment awaits Job (34:21-37). He takes old banal thoughts from Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, and mixes in new but misguided thoughts of his own. Elihu's view of God might be more alive and less mechanical than that of the older friends; yet he cannot see the deeper implications of God's qualities, because to him God's knowledge merely makes Job's 'sin' and ultimate 'punishment' more certain. All four fail to realize that if God sees all, then he also sees how badly Job is suffering. Elihu's logic fails him when he needs it the most.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why is Elihu so vehement in saying that God cannot do anything wrong? Are his statements true in themselves? How do his thoughts so far compare with those of Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar? What can we learn from him so far?

### ***Mixed Perspectives On God (Job 35:1-36:26)***

Though much of what he has said is drearily conventional, the youthful Elihu does have some thoughts of his own - and some of them are even worth considering. In the immediate context of Job, he adds only a small number of new ideas. But from a broader viewpoint, Elihu's odd mixture of perspectives teaches us some pertinent lessons that can be applied more widely.

Elihu can be perceptive and misguided at the same time, and this is the case with his thoughts about God's perspective on our sins\* (35:1-8). His question, "if you sin, how does that affect him?" is worth asking, and it shows that Elihu is not completely bound by convention. Yet his conclusions are a mixture of insight and folly - and they show the limitations of logic alone.

\* Here Elihu is trying to counter some of Job's previous statements. In verse 5 and 7, especially, he is responding to statements that Job has been earlier.

In one sense, God is not at all harmed or affected in any way by human sin, or for that matter by any human activity. Nothing we can do will ever make God cease to be God, nor can we ever take away any of his divine qualities - he is always what he is. He will always be all-glorious, all-knowing, and immortal whether we worship him or curse him.

But there is an important dimension that Elihu misses. In viewing God as an impartial dispenser of justice, he is unaware of how strongly God wants to know each of his creatures. In that regard, sin very much hurts him, because it hinders the closeness he longs to have with us. Elihu has asked a good question but then drawn simplistic conclusions - perhaps because of his youth.

We see something similar in his thoughts about God's perspective on our pleas (35:9-16). He is perceptive enough to notice that many humans cry for help for their worries and problems, yet few of them truly seek help directly from God their Maker. Indeed, many of humanity's appeals to 'God' are really just appeals to human religion, not to the living God. Yet Elihu goes astray when he says that God brusquely rejects all such pleas from those who are not truly seeking him.

Whenever humanity - or an individual human - calls out, God hears and cares. He may indeed not be able to help much of the time, but this is because we do not allow him to, not because he does not care about us unless we are completely faithful to him. He loves and longs to help all of humanity with their problems - it is we who often do not let him. "How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing." (Matthew 23:37, Luke 13:34) Elihu has raised a good point but then oversimplified it.

When Elihu talks about God's perspective on punishment, he simply goes astray (36:1-15). He is quite certain that he understands the issue (note verse 4!), but he has a thoroughly stereotyped view of God's attitudes towards rewards and punishments. He makes a good comment that, "God is mighty, but does not despise men"; but he does not really understand the implications of this concept. He misunderstands both the purpose and the means of God's discipline.

So when Elihu comes to describe God's perspective on Job and Job's problems, he has a slightly different view than the other three friends have - yet ultimately he too fails to see the things that matter the most (36:16-26). Commentators sometimes see in Elihu's approach something resembling what might once have been called a "first strike" strategy - Elihu is willing to admit that Job might not have done something so bad as to deserve all his suffering, but in that case Elihu believes that Job's suffering must have come to prevent him from doing something sinful.

His image of God, "wooing you from the jaws of distress" is a good one in itself, but he sees this only from a narrow viewpoint. Elihu's God is too impersonal, concerned only with results; whereas the living God cares very much about knowing us and living with us. When he does 'woo' someone from spiritual distress, it will be more personal than anything Elihu can imagine.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: In what ways do Elihu's thoughts illustrate his youth? In what ways do they reflect human nature in general? Which of his thoughts could be useful if we just apply them differently than he does?

### *Prelude To The Finale (Job 36:27-37:24)*

Elihu's closing thoughts anticipate much of what God will say in the coming finale. Yet there is a depth and an understanding that is missing when Elihu speaks of God's majesty and might, because he sees these great qualities only from a relatively narrow point of view. And so once again we can see the great difference between human knowledge and divine wisdom.

His awareness of God's majesty does seem to be better than that of Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar (36:27-37:13). He clearly sees that God both rules and also provides, and to all appearances he sees this a bit less superficially than the others would have. His view of God is still overly impersonal, yet at least it is more multi-dimensional than the others' concepts of God.

Using the imagery of a thunderstorm\*, Elihu describes God's ability to do "great things beyond our understanding". Yet while he knows that God is great in power and knowledge, his 'God' is too predictable. Elihu understands God's infinite capacity for action and intervention, but he cannot see that God does not have to use his abilities only to punish sin and reward goodness - his decisions will often directly contradict our concepts of 'right' and 'wrong'. Elihu is focused only on behavioral results - God is more concerned with personal intimacy.

\* In Job's time and place, a thunderstorm would often have been intimidating but still very welcome. In that climate, thunderstorms often came during extreme dry spells, and could thus be a reason for rejoicing despite bringing hazards of their own. Elihu probably wants to illustrate both sides of this.

And so Elihu's conclusion, in which he attempts to persuade Job that God is beyond our reach, sounds good at times but in the end is mere rhetoric (37:14-24). Though Elihu has some good thoughts, his closing remarks are almost a caricature of the discourse that God is about to make. He appreciates God's power, but he has a simplistic view of how God uses it. He compares Job's helplessness to a man rendered inactive by stifling heat\*, emphasizing Job's absolute inability to change God; but he sees only one side of the relationship between God and humanity.

\* A stifling south wind (verse 15) generally brought complete inactivity to the area. This is in contrast to an east wind, often used as an image by the prophets, which was equally scorching but more dangerous.

Like so many believers in every era, Elihu sees God as all-powerful but largely impersonal - despite Elihu's emphasis on God's strength and majesty, his concept of God is, ironically, very limited. Only Job has any real awareness of God's interest in knowing his creatures, as opposed to a mere desire to make them behave. Even God's majestic answer (chapters 38-41) is often misunderstood as a putdown of Job. But though much of what God says is similar to Elihu's imagery, God is not merely more eloquent - he also speaks from a much deeper perspective.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What is Elihu's goal in presenting his images of God's power and majesty? What qualities of God does he intend to depict? What important qualities of God does he ignore or not understand? What does this tell us about his perspective? What overall lessons should we learn from Elihu and his speech?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, May 2013*

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## **BORN TO TROUBLE: LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF JOB**

### **Notes For Week Eleven: Out Of The Storm (Job 38-41)**

*The climax of Job comes when God finally speaks out, responding at last to Job's many pleas and questions. God does not reply directly to the main points Job has raised - instead, he speaks at length about what he has done and created, and asks Job to consider the implications. Even more significant than the factual content is the extended personal contact God grants to Job.*

#### ***Some Basic Perspective (Job 38:1-38)***

When God speaks "out of the storm", he steps back from all of the contentious issues discussed by Job and his friends, to provide some basic but crucial perspective for understanding his ways. He describes in detail the knowledge, power, and transcendence that went into his Creation, in order to emphasize that his perspective rises far above that of any mortal human.

God is fulfilling Job's greatest desire simply by finally making himself available to talk (38:1-7). He treats Job with firm respect, showing Job that God considers him worth the time to talk to, while making his points to Job\* clearly and directly. God's response would not always work as a one-size-fits-all answer to every struggling or suffering Christian; rather, God provides Job with exactly what he really needs - though certainly not what he expected. For his part, Job will be fully satisfied with God establishing his presence, leaving many specific questions unanswered.

\* In the original, the phrase often translated as, "who ... darkens my counsel" (verse 2) means that Job is in the dark (misguided or misinformed) in many of his thoughts. The others are even more in error, of course.

God first reminds Job of the form and structure of Creation (38:8-38). He describes what he had to do in order to bring the physical universe into being, and all the things involved in keeping it running smoothly. Images ranging from God fixing 'limits' for the seas to his 'storehouses' of hail and snow\* to his control over the stars (constellations) emphasize that God not merely created all these things, but also reigns over them. Everything is in its place, as God designed.

\* Note that many of these images are not (and could not be) literal - the intent is not to instruct Job or us in the factual details of Creation, but rather to leave a vivid image of God's majesty, wisdom, and power.

God is choosing these images to impress upon Job the way that God's presence permeates everything that he has made. So far he has described only the non-living (inanimate) things he has created, and yet even in these things God's presence is revealed time and time again.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Could there be a specific reason why God responds at this particular time? How would it be appropriate for him to begin with these points about the Creation? Would he have started differently with someone other than Job? What is the point behind this first series of images? How could they be helpful to Job?

#### ***The Living Creation (Job 38:39-39:30)***

God now switches to a new series of images that emphasize the life that pervades Creation. His brief panorama of living things reminds us that there are many more out there, all created by God and sustained by God. He gave each creature its own nature and its own purpose - and if this is so, then how much more is God aware of the lives of each human, created in his own image.

The first set of animal images connects lions, ravens, goats, and deer - seemingly unrelated creatures (38:38-39:4). The common thread is that God provides for their needs, despite how different they are from one another. God arranges for them to be fed, and he provides for them in childbirth. God takes care of the entire natural world - and "if that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?" (Matthew 6:30) This does not mean that we will always have everything - but it does mean that God is always aware of our needs.

The imagery of wild donkeys and wild oxen makes a different point (39:5-12). Both animals have been domesticated, yet they also live in the wild\*, where they roam free. God granted domestic animals to humanity as a gift by grace - for God's creatures were by nature made to live free lives of their own. Humans are so obsessed with trying to control and manage every detail of life that we rarely appreciate God's graciousness in allowing us to use (and misuse) his Creation. "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers . . . what is man that you are mindful of him? . . . you made him ruler over the works of your hands" (Psalm 8:3,4,6).

\* In Job's lifetime, there were probably more wild donkeys and bovines than domesticated ones.

God now changes pace with his description of the ostrich (39:13-18). This is one of God's most hilarious-looking creatures, with habits that often strike humans as eccentric or odd. Yet it is alert and resourceful; and perhaps more importantly, it is often misunderstood by humans\*.

\* Today there is a common myth that ostriches bury their heads when they sense trouble - something real ostriches do not do. This is an old misconception based on some of the ostrich's actual habits.

The ostrich lays its eggs directly on warm, soft ground with no protection. It often runs away swiftly when a predator nears its nest, and this was once often misunderstood as a lack of concern for its young. But in reality, the ostrich's body leaves it few other options for egg-laying; and it runs from the nest to draw away the predator by putting the adult at risk. Yet the ostrich enjoys its life despite its ungainliness and the way it is misunderstood. God himself loves ostriches, and he also loves eccentric, outcast, or unpopular human souls.

The horse is well-known for its usefulness to humanity, yet it is also an animal that knows how to enjoy its own true nature (39:19-25). When a powerful horse provides muscle or transportation for humans, which is really the master? Are humans using the horse against its will, or does a horse find humans a useful means to experience adventure and fulfillment? In any case, the horse would be an impressive animal even if humans had found no use for it. Likewise, God shows equal attention to every human, whether considered useful or useless by others.

The final images of the hawk and the eagle make a simpler point (39:26-30). These wide-ranging birds view the rest of Creation from above and afar. Yet even their lofty vantage point is nothing when compared with God's heavenly, eternal perspective. He does not merely passively observe all factual information on events in this world, for his transcendent perspective also gives him the ability to be involved in every corner of our physical universe.

Although humans sometimes view God's all-seeing eye as a threat, in reality it gives us the great security of knowing that he always knows our needs, our hopes, and our fears. Job understood this, and he accepted these images as a welcome source of comfort in his pain.

Questions For Discussion Or Study Why would God use animals as illustrations for Job? Do they have general significance as well? Would Job have expected this? How would each of these images teach Job? Would the lessons necessarily be the same for us?

### ***God & Job (Job 40:1-14)***

Only after his extended discourse on Creation does God now turn to some of the questions that Job has brought up in the course of his sufferings. God emphasizes the complete inability of any mortal to bend the world to human will. Yet God never accuses Job of sin, nor does he threaten him - but he does show Job how important it is to keep their relationship on the proper terms.

When God pauses for Job to reply, Job answers God humbly (40:1-5). Though he says little, he seems already satisfied that his greatest concern has been answered, for God has shown that he has been present all the while, and that he has known all along about Job's situation and his sufferings. Job freely acknowledges that he has no further questions of God.

Job does have some lessons to learn, so God asks, "would you condemn me to justify yourself?" (40:6-14). This was not Job's intention, but in overreacting to his friends, he implied as much. God could have been outraged, but he lovingly corrects Job, explaining that Job does not need to criticize or blame God in order to make himself seem righteous. For us too, it is very easy to see the ills of the world and blame God for not doing more to solve them. Yet it is not necessary to criticize God in order to show that we care about the injustice and sorrow of the world.

And so God presents Job with a gently satirical 'challenge'. He offers to let Job confront the world's troublemakers, to teach them to fear him and obey him, promising to give Job his full respect if Job can accomplish this feat. This is a firm but thoughtful way of reminding Job of the enormous number of problems in this world that are beyond the power of any human to remedy. God allows free will to all, and Job's will is no stronger (and no weaker) than anyone else's.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Can we tell how God feels towards Job right now? What qualities of God can we see in his answers to Job? Can we tell how Job feels towards God? What has he learned so far? What might he still need to learn or hear?

### ***God's Power Unleashed (Job 40:15-41:34)***

God concludes his discourse with a seemingly odd choice of topics. His lengthy descriptions of the "behemoth" and the "leviathan" are even less literal and more fanciful than his previous nature imagery. Whether these represent actual living creatures or mythical beasts, in either case God is using this unusual imagery to describe his unknowable and uncontainable power.

The two beasts that God describes in concluding his discourse were not meant to be obscure or to give rise to speculation, yet today it is probably not possible to identify them with certainty because of all the theological noise that has accumulated around them over the centuries. But there are only two likely identifications: either they refer poetically (that is, with deliberately exaggerated details) to two known beasts, or else they refer metaphorically to mythical creatures.

In any case, the basic significance of these images is not literal. The literal details cannot be matched with any species of animal, alive or extinct\*; and they do not even match precisely with any specific beast from mythology or folklore. So whatever the proper interpretation is, the primary meaning of the imagery is how God's unlimited power is expressed and displayed.

\* In particular, the literal details do not match with any type of dinosaur. This should be self-evident, but there are commentators who, in the misguided belief that they are being faithful to the literal meaning of Scripture, use this passage as 'proof' that humans and dinosaurs lived at the same time.

The "behemoth" is a massive land beast that seemingly lives without fear, an herbivore that nonetheless fears no predator (40:15-24). Commentators most commonly associate the "behemoth"\* with either a hippopotamus or an elephant (the word translated 'tail' in verse 17 could mean its trunk), though in either case the depiction contains considerable poetic license. Thus, a few commentators look at this as a description of a now-unidentified mythical creature.

\* In Hebrew, the word "behemoth" (a transliteration of the original) is just the simple plural of an everyday day word meaning 'beast' or 'beast of the field', often used in reference to cattle. It is usually understood that in this context it is a name for one particular, powerful creature. But note also its use in Joel 1:20.

Regardless of whether we can precisely identify the "behemoth", it is an effective illustration of God's power on earth. The God who created the great beasts, with their enormous strength and power, himself dwarfs them and rules them. Any earthly display of raw force and strength is nothing at all compared with God's absolute mastery over all natural beings and forces.

The "leviathan"\* is a fearsome beast that lives in or mostly in the water (41:1-34). Most commentators associate it with the crocodile\*\*, with the same cautions as before about the literal details. Regardless of the identification, it is meant to symbolize God's power in the depths of his Creation - the ways that God has shown himself, revealed his presence, and demonstrated his majesty even in the remotest corners and most dangerous areas of the physical world.

\* Both "behemoth" and "leviathan" have become well-known literary terms. "Behemoth" is often used as a reference to any enormous creature (including sometimes humans). "Leviathan" can symbolize a whale or other large sea creature, or an all-entangling serpentine beast, not necessarily literal (as in Thomas Hobbes' book *Leviathan*.) It is used in Isaiah 27:1 as a metaphorical image for nations threatening the Israelites.

\*\* The Nile crocodile was greatly feared in ancient times, and was the subject of many fanciful legends. The imagery in Job could represent actual beliefs about the crocodile at the time. To a lesser degree, this might have been true of the hippopotamus (feared for its temper) or elephant (with its unusual form).

God's message to Job centers on his presence. God has always been present everywhere, at every time, and in every aspect of his Creation. God emphasizes this not to rebuke Job or shame him, but to reassure him that he is with him even in the worst of times. And, whether using nature imagery or in some other way, God wishes also to reassure each of us of his constant presence. "God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us." (Acts 17:27)

God understands that there will frequently be things that cause us to forget this, and that lead us to demand an answer from God on our own terms. In such times, God uses all available means to try to communicate his presence. He will not ignore our cries for help, but his own nature and his sincere love for us mean that God must always answer in his own way and in his own time.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why is it hard to make precise identifications of these beasts? Does this matter? Why would God use such fanciful imagery? What lessons might Job have gotten from these images? How would God's overall response differ from what Job expected? What can we learn from this?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, May 2013

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## **BORN TO TROUBLE: LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF JOB**

### **Notes For Week Twelve: Starting Over (Job 42)**

*The end of Job's ordeal is also a new beginning - and not just for Job himself. Job emerges spiritually deeper and stronger, while his friends are chastened and are called to re-evaluate their own relationship with God. Of course, Job also returns to a life of prosperity; yet this is a distant second to the ways that his relationships are renewed and strengthened.*

#### ***Now My Eyes Have Seen You (Job 42:1-6)***

Even though God's response to him was not what he expected, Job is fully satisfied by what God has taught him. He now has a deeper faith and confidence in God. Most of all, he is humbled by talking with God face-to-face. Indeed, this is always the result when anyone truly sees God - it is not possible to have a glimpse of the living God without being filled with humility.

Job has emerged from his spiritual crisis with a renewed trust in God (42:1-3). He does not need to get detailed answers to his original questions in order to realize that God is, always has been, and always will be aware of whatever is going on in Job's life, as well as everything else in the physical universe. Job knows now that God will not always act as Job wishes him to, but instead he now understands God's providence and wisdom in a much deeper way.

Job talks of "things too wonderful for me to understand" to express the kind of faith he has now found in God. Instead of believing that doing good always leads to positive things in earthly terms, Job has instead discovered spiritual blessings that re-assure him even more. He knows that he can always count on God's presence and God's understanding, and he has had a powerful glimpse of the difference that these can make even when earthly troubles become unbearable.

Job has been humbled, but also renewed (42:4-6). To see only his humbling would be to admit that his cloddish friends were right; but also, seeing only Job's return to prosperity would trivialize the spiritual perspective that God so carefully taught him in his climactic discourse.

Job now sees many things more clearly, not through new factual knowledge or a better list of rules, but because "now my eyes have seen you", because he has had an unforgettable encounter with God's presence. In Scripture, seeing God invariably has a humbling effect. In Scripture, believers who see God do not obtain a fleshly thrill from the experience, but instead become overwhelmingly aware of the gulf between them and God that can be bridged only by his grace.

Isaiah 6:1-5 describes the prophet's first sight of God on his throne, and the prophet's terror at the realization that he, a flawed human, is in the presence of divine perfection. Luke 5:4-8\* tells of Peter, when given firsthand an unmistakable sign of Jesus' divinity, falling on his knees to beg Jesus to withdraw his presence, because Peter realizes his sinfulness. Those who truly see God do not come away convinced of their own religious virtue - they come away convinced that no human being, however religious, can ever stand before God except by God's grace and tolerance.

\* Consider also the examples of persons such as Moses and Paul when they first truly saw God or Jesus. See also the discussion questions below.

It is in this light that we can best understand Job's repentance "in dust and ashes". He is not repenting of sin, neither specifically nor in general; but rather he has had a complete change of mind - the literal meaning of repentance. He realizes his absolute unworthiness compared with God, but this does not depress him\* - it renews him. Even before God restores his old way of life to him, Job has found a spiritual peace and security in a deepened understanding of God and a keener awareness of his presence.

\* To say that Job "despises himself" (NIV, RSV) is probably misleading. Although the Hebrew word can be translated this way, in the present context it more likely means to humble himself or to abash himself.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why did God's response satisfy Job even though God never addressed Job's main questions? What does Job by "too wonderful"? Has he learned any specific lessons? In what sense does he 'repent'? How does Job's response compare with that of others who saw or heard God? What can we learn from this?

### ***A Fresh Start For Job's Friends (Job 42:7-9)***

God does not neglect to address the things that Job's friends have said. Although they saw themselves as 'defending' God against Job's impertinent questions, in reality God found Job's honest questioning far more pleasing than their unthinking, insensitive pat answers. Yet God loves them too, and he graciously gives them a fresh start - though with an ironic twist.

God now speaks directly to Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar\*, explicitly telling them that, "you have not spoken what is right" (42:7). Though they had somewhat different approaches in trying to persuade Job of their views, all three friends made similar mistakes. All three of them stubbornly believed, despite all evidence to the contrary, that God always quickly and decisively rewards good behavior and punishes sin. This preconception led them to make many other false conclusions, which they kept pushing Job to accept.

\* God never gives an assessment of Elihu's discourse; and commentators differ as to why. In any case, we are left to appraise Elihu's thoughts by comparison with other material in the book.

But beyond their erroneous beliefs is a deeper error of perspective. Like so many believers, they judge by outward appearance and results, with no understanding of the importance of spiritual relationships. They erroneously think that God values outward behavior above a searching faith that looks for God's presence. They have no patience for difficult questions - and instead of admitting that they couldn't answer Job's questions, they condemned him for asking them\*.

\* There are some rudimentary parallels between the three friends' treatment of Job and the Pharisees' treatment of Jesus in the New Testament. Jesus' lengthy critique of the Pharisees in Matthew 23 includes a number of points that could be applied to Eliphaz and the others. Yet just as Jesus concludes that speech by lamenting that he only wants to gather everyone to him, so also God will show grace to these three.

But God merely corrects these oafs, and does not permanently condemn them - he calls for sacrifice and prayer so that they can restore their relationship with him (42:8-9). God's abundant grace is offered to them as well. They have damaged their relationship with God by their hard-hearted treatment of Job, yet God's desire is to forgive them if they will accept their need for his grace. But - at least from the viewpoint of anyone who can identify with Job in his ordeal - there is a remarkable and satisfying irony in God's directives to the group.

The three friends must each offer sacrifices, yet they will not be cleansed until (or unless) Job himself prays for them and asks God to forgive them. Here they have been sitting in judgment of Job, convinced that his standing with God depended on their approval of his words and actions - only to find that in reality God will wait for Job to pray for them before they can be cleansed of their sins. Those in the church today who push their programs, views, and methods as a standard that others must follow, and who deliberately instill guilt or anxiety in those who do not obey their self-assumed authority, would do well to consider the parallels that might apply to them.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Would Job's three friends have expected what God said to them? Why does God still want to forgive them? Why does he give them these particular instructions? Why is it important that Job pray for them? What parallels does all this have for today's believers?

### ***Relationships Restored (Job 42:10-17)***

God restores Job's wealth, yet this is only incidental to the greatest blessings he receives now that his ordeal is over. Not only is his relationship with God much stronger than it ever has been, but his relationships with his family and friends are also restored and strengthened. This was what Job had most longed for during his time of loss, so now he has what matters most to him.

Job's brothers and sisters appear for the first time, coming to join their brother now that his nightmare is over (42:10-11). No reason is ever given for their unexplained absence during Job's period of despair, and commentators often assume that they silently agreed with Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar that Job's problems must have been deserved. In any case, their apparent neglect of Job when he needed their help does not speak particularly well of them.

But now their restored fellowship with their brother is part of an overall picture of spiritual renewal. They even go to an opposite extreme, by bringing gifts of silver and gold\* to help Job get back to solid financial standing. Their gifts become part of God's overall grace to Job in giving him back the things he once possessed. And as so often in Scripture, an act of giving brings grace to both sides. By coming to their brother belatedly but voluntarily, they have made their own relationships with God better.

\* Commentators tend to think that the amounts brought by each person were relatively small, but enough to 'get Job started' again. (A few commentators instead see it as a symbolic gesture of loyalty, rather than emphasizing any financial assistance.) It is not particularly important to know what proportion of his newfound wealth came from them, because their willingness to give is in itself more significant.

Whether directly, indirectly, or by a combination of means, God sees to it that Job's wealth is restored (42:12). The inventory in the text helps us to see (by comparison with Job 1:3) that Job now has twice as much as he previously had lost. Though this is probably what many readers remember about the ending of Job, note that much less emphasis is put on Job's new material wealth compared with his relationships and his spiritual well-being. The doubling of Job's material wealth is just an extra act of grace on God's part\*.

\* Some commentators erroneously see this as God acknowledging a (legal) obligation to repay Job. They base this in part on a misunderstanding of the laws of restitution in Exodus 22:1-15 and Leviticus 6:1-5. Although in certain instances a thief was required to repay double, there was no general two-for-one policy. The proportion of restitution varied considerably depending on the circumstance and the type of property.

Perhaps best of all for Job, he is eventually given a new family of the same size as the one he lost in the series of disasters (42:13-17). We should not, though, think that this completely makes up for the sons and daughters whom he lost forever\* - indeed, few parents, though surely comforted by the new children, would consider this an even exchange. God realizes that nothing can make up for the children that Job has lost, but he does make sure that Job once more enjoys the blessings of spiritual fatherhood.

\* A few commentators, disturbed by the necessity of Job having to wait for all these new children to grow up, have concocted fanciful theories about Job's dead children being resurrected. The text itself, though, hardly leaves room for such a scenario.

Of particular significance is the spotlight on Job's daughters. Contrary to convention, we are told their names\* instead of the sons' names. Most significantly, Job grants his daughters an equal inheritance to that of his sons - an act well ahead of its time\*\*. As we had noted earlier in the book, Job's ordeal has made him more sensitive, rather than more self-centered. He has gained new insight into the many ways that earthly life can be unfair, and now he shows that he can do his small part to make it a little less so.

\* Though perhaps interesting - the daughters' names mean, respectively, dove (or possibly day), cinnamon (or cassia, a similar spice), and 'horn of antimony' (a cosmetic) - the daughters' names in themselves have only minor significance. Simply recognizing the daughters by name is in itself significant.

\*\* Later on (see Numbers 27:1-11 and 36:1-12), Levitical law would provide for daughters to inherit if (but only if) a father had only daughters and no sons. Job has already gone much farther than that.

Job sees his descendants to the fourth generation, not unusual in the patriarchal era, but still a real blessing. In place of the lost and damaged relationships that so hurt and distressed him, he now has a complete range of healthy and joyous relationships with family, with friends, and most importantly with God. Consider also that, "everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life" (Matthew 19:29, see also Mark 10:29-30 and Luke 18:29-30.)

Faced with the worst possible circumstances, Job began a search for truth; and he did not waver from seeking the truth even when everyone around him gave him bad advice. He always expected, or at least hoped, that God would eventually answer his plea for help. God's way of responding was no doubt unexpected in itself, but it was fully satisfying to Job. By giving Job a renewed appreciation of his relationship with God and a strengthened awareness of God's constant presence, God granted Job a spiritual renewal that has also led to a renewal of what counts most in his life on this earth: his relationships with family and friends.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What is the purpose of God directing Job's friends to make sacrifices and to ask Job to pray for them? What lessons should we get from their need for cleansing? What changes occur in Job's life now that his relationship with God is strengthened? How is each change appropriate? What should we learn from them?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, May 2013*

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