

Job

1

The book of Job in the Old Testament tells of a person who was blameless and upright, who feared God and shunned evil. He lived in the lap of luxury and was seriously rich – a multi millionaire at today's prices.

When we first meet Job in chapter 1 he could be singing, "O what a beautiful morning ... everything's going my way." But then, suddenly, out of a clear blue sky, it seems as if all hell's let loose. In a day, everything was wiped out. His livestock were snatched by raiding parties, fire fell from the sky and burned up his sheep and servants and a tornado whipped in from the desert and struck the house where his seven sons and three daughters were celebrating and it collapsed and ended their lives. Imagine the shock and horror of such a sudden reversal of fortune. His business was totally ruined and ten family funerals occurred after such a tragedy.

One reason why believers are drawn to the book of Job is because it faces up to the hard questions in life. It doesn't pretend that if you put your trust in God, you will live a sheltered life and be happy all the day! Bad things do happen to good people. Like Job we can be groping in the dark disappointed with God, wondering why all this is happening to us. Perhaps, like Job, our faith is on trial.

In chapter 1 of Job we are told something Job never knew. We are shown the scenery behind the things that are seen. Satan, the accuser of the brethren, had come before God after roaming to and fro through the earth. He casts a slur upon God's servant Job suggesting he's only serving God because God is hedging him around with blessings. Satan suggests to God if anything goes wrong in Job's life he will curse You to Your face. Satan implies that God is not worthy to be loved for Himself alone, but only for what people can get out of Him. It's as if he's saying, 'You have to pay Job to love You and serve You.'

God, who knows the end from the beginning, and has plans to prosper His servant Job, allows his faith which is 'of greater worth than gold' to be tested and refined. God sets the ground rules. The Devil is not allowed to take Job's life, but he can steal and destroy his health and his wealth.

A boy in Sunday Club put it rather crudely: "You mean God and Satan had a bet and God won." Listen carefully. Job, without his knowledge, is being made a test case, an example of perseverance for future generations of believers whose faith will be tried and tested. God had permitted the devil to strip Job down to his naked soul. It is important that we judge nothing before the time. Though Job doesn't know it, it will work out for his good and the glory of God eventually. But it doesn't look like it today or while the trial of faith continues. We always think the trial of our faith should end, just when it's beginning.

It is important to understand that what happened to Job was not punishment for sin. God says to Satan (chapter 2 verse3) speaking of Job, "There is no one on

earth like him ... blameless and upright ... He still maintains his integrity, though you incited me against him to ruin him without any reason." Of course, there's a good and sufficient reason in the internal counsels of God, but all the while Job is kept in the dark.

His response, when his world fell apart, is amazing. "He fell to the ground in worship and said 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised.' In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing" (chapter 1 verses 20-22). Job's assumption throughout is that God has wreaked all this havoc. He doesn't know what we know. The initial response of this godly patriarch is amazing.

Under pressure, the real Job surfaces and he worships God as he did before. Under pressure, the real Mrs. Job, his wife, also surfaces and she cursed. She lost everything that he lost, but her response is vicious. "His wife said to him, 'Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die!' He replied, 'You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?' In all this, Job did not sin in what he said."

We need to remember that God found no fault with Job, but Satan did. We must be very careful about explaining why certain things happen to other people. Beware of saying that x has happened to so and so for such and such a reason. We may be very wide of the mark.

I used to think that God tempted Satan to have a go at Job. Of course, God does not tempt anyone, nor can He be tempted by evil (James chapter 1 verse 13). Although God brings up the subject of his servant Job and Satan sees him as a pawn on life's chessboard and accepts the challenge, we get the distinct impression that God is confident that His servant Job will not fail the test. God is up to something good. On lookers in the unseen realm are watching what is going on whenever faith is on trial.

This great salvation, which has come to us through the Lord Jesus Christ, is something 'even angels long to look into' (I Peter I verse 12).

Job

2

We're dipping into what Tennyson called, "The greatest poem whether of ancient or modern literature." It's the book of Job where 'the greatest man among all the people of the East' finds himself with one foot in the grave and his world suddenly turned upside down and he hasn't a clue why this has happened to him. He's parked up at the city dump where the garbage is tipped. He is covered in painful sores from head to foot. Severe itching torments him.

Job looked down the road and saw his three friends coming towards him – Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar – surely they would understand and sympathise with him and comfort him. Job chapter 2 verses 12-13 says, "When they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognise him; they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads. Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was."

Job's friends were most helpful to him whilst they identified with him in his tragic circumstances and remained silent. It's when they try to explain why these events have happened that they make matters worse by inferring that Job's been up to no good and has brought these disasters upon himself.

Picture the scene in chapter 3. The catalogue of catastrophes that have stunned Job and sent him reeling cause his anguish to erupt in despair. He says, "If only I'd not been born." "Why did I not perish at birth, and die as I came from the womb?" (verse 12). Job laments, "What I feared has come upon me; what I dreaded has happened to me, I have no peace, no quietness; I have no rest, but only turmoil" (verses 25-26).

It becomes clear, at the end of the book of Job, that his three friends were speaking a fair amount of nonsense. Some things they said were right, some were wrong. They offered Job a dangerous mixture of half-truths that sounded plausible, but wasn't right (chapter 42 verse 7).

The first up to try and interpret these frightening events is a man called Eliphaz. His is the voice of experience. He insinuates that Job must have done something wrong to deserve such treatment at the hand of God. Listen to him in chapter 4 verses 7-8. "Consider now: who, being innocent, has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed? As I observed, those who plough evil and those who sow trouble reap it."

Eliphaz has had a dream in the night, although there is no indication that it is from God. Eliphaz declares (chapter 5 verses 7-8) "Man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward. But if it were I, I would appeal to God; I would lay my cause before Him." In chapter 5 verse 17 Eliphaz says, "Blessed is the man whom God corrects; so do not despise the discipline of the Almighty."

Eliphaz's diagnosis is wide of the mark. God does discipline His children, but He does not destroy them. Chastening is not always the reason that God's people suffer. To assume that "God is correcting you" may not necessarily be right. Who are you, Eliphaz, to make such a judgement? What he's come out with, hasn't helped at all.

In chapters 6 and 7 we find Job crying out like a wounded animal. He insists there is no secret sin in his life. There's no need for him to get right with God because he is right with God. The analysis of the situation provided by Eliphaz is wrong.

Job is traumatised. He says his misery is heavier than the sand of the seas. "No wonder my words have been impetuous" (chapter 6 verse 3). He states, "The arrows of the Almighty are in me" (verse 4). He feels like God's dartboard and he can't work it out. This isn't the way it's supposed to be. He wishes that God would finish him off. "Then I would still have this consolation – my joy in unrelenting pain – that I had not denied the words of the Holy One" (verse 10). He still believes that God is a good God. He doesn't know something that we were told in chapters 1 and 2 that all these dreadful events have come from Satan 'without any reason' on Job's part. He maintains his integrity is at stake.

Job is in dire straits, unsightly to look at. Chapter 7 verses 5-7 reveal his despair. Job says, "My body is clothed with worms and scabs, my skin is broken and festering. My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle, and they come to an end without hope. Remember, O God, that my life is but a breath; my eyes will never see happiness again."

Perhaps I'm addressing someone whose whole world is in ruins. You find it easy to identify with Job when he says to God, "Let me alone; my days have no meaning (chapter 7 verse 16). You're puzzled, battered and bewildered by events, so unexpected that you've been knocked for six and can't think straight. It all seems so unfair. Trust in God, though you can't feel Him. Persevere, endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ and, in the darkness, still commit your way to Him.

Job

3

Martin Luther said of Job, "This book is more magnificent and sublime than any other book of scripture." We've seen the drama unfold - a wealthy, powerful sheikh who hit rock bottom. It's the story of a tormented man, the bitter complaint of someone who is tasting the very dregs in the bottom of the cup of life. Job feels he's just rotting away. "My days have no meaning," he says to God. "Let me alone" (chapter 7 verse 16). This is a book that deals with the mystery of pain and the great riddle in life, "Why do the righteous suffer?"

Three friends have sat in silence with Job for seven days. It was good that they were with him, that they sat where he sat, as they sought to absorb the enormity of the heart breaking events that had suddenly ram-raided his settled lifestyle. It's when they start talking that more trouble ensues.

Eliphaz opened the debate, but his premise was completely wrong. Job is not being punished for sin. Now it's Bildad's turn to speak. He's a traditionalist; full of old sayings, pious platitudes and slick cliches. In chapter 8 verses 8-9 Bildad declares, "Ask the former generations and find out what their fathers learned, for we were born only yesterday and know nothing, and our days on earth are but a shadow." He comes out with some crude and blunt statements. He asserts that Job's ten children must have been sinning against God and have received their just desserts (chapter 8 verse 4). What a cruel thing to say to someone recently bereft of all his offspring.

Bildad declared, "Surely God does not reject a blameless man or strengthen the hands of evildoers" (chapter 8 verse 20). That was a widespread Old Testament belief. Obey God and you'll be blessed: disobey God and big trouble will follow. However, that explanation doesn't fit Job's situation. All too frequently it seems, the innocent suffer and the evildoers prosper.

It's very clear that Bildad is a rather heartless comforter. He failed completely to speak into Job's situation, thus revealing he didn't really know God or Job or himself. Suffering is a mystery and there are no pat answers. To the "Frequently Asked Questions" of the human condition, there are no "one click of the mouse" answers.

Because Job's comforters are so insensitive to his tragic situation, they tend to wind him up and bring out the worst in him. Job is baffled. "Where is God in all this? I know His wisdom is profound, His power is vast ... He alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the sea ... He performs wonders that can not be fathomed, miracles that can not be counted ... but where is He now, in my life?" Here's the bewilderment of a man who's lost God. He can't think straight after all he's been through. So he says in chapter 9 verse 11, "When He passes me, I can not see Him; when He goes by, I can not perceive Him."

Not knowing that his faith is on trial and that God has permitted Satan to steal from Job, the patriarch believes that all this turmoil is God's doing and it is manifestly unfair.

In chapter 9 verse 21 Job says, "Although I am blameless, I have no concern for myself; I despise my own life. It is all the same, that is why I say, 'He destroys both the blameless and the wicked'" (verse 22). In frustration he cries, "If it is not He, then who is it?" (verse 24). Job would really like to have a one-on-one with God to find out what's going on. "If only there were someone to arbitrate between us, to lay his hand upon us both, someone to remove God's rod from me, so that His terror would frighten me no more" (verses 33-34). Job's heartfelt cry is for a mediator - someone who, as a man, knew what it felt like to be despised and rejected and acquainted with grief - someone who could speak to God for him.

In chapter 10 Job gives free rein to his complaint and speaks out in the bitterness of his soul. Sometimes when we're depressed or in great pain we say things we don't really mean. He's not happy with God. He asks, "Does it please You to oppress me, to spurn the work of Your hands, while You smile on the schemes of the wicked?" (verse 3). Job is frustrated. God, 'You know that I am not guilty and that no one can rescue me from Your hand. Your hands shaped me and made me. Will You now turn and destroy me? Remember that You moulded me like clay. Will You now turn me to dust again?' (verses 7-9). Job is hurting. He feels 'drowned in his affliction', as if God is stalking him like a lion. Verse 17 says, 'Your forces come against me wave upon wave.' In deep distress he wishes he had never been born or, if still born, he'd been carried from the womb to the tomb. He wishes he'd been locked away in the darkness of death.

Job cries out to God in impatience. He was not a patient man. Patience and humility are spiritual fruit produced in our lives through trying experiences. James chapter 5 verse 11 says, "As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion."

When we're in the thick of it and feel we can't take any more, remember, "The Lord is full of compassion and mercy" even when it doesn't look like it. Remember what the Lord finally brought about after Job persevered.

Job

4

Job's heart has been crying out in anger against the awfulness of real life. Why is life so hard? Why do people suffer? Job's mood must have fluctuated several times a day between humble submission to God's will, as in chapter 1 and 2, and anger at the seeming injustice of his suffering. Utter despair and then living faith - a roller coaster ride. Job really wants to put God in the dock. His personal dilemma is his own innocence and God's apparently unjust treatment of him. It doesn't make sense.

In chapter 11 Job's third friend joins the debate. His name is Zophar, which means 'a sparrow'. He twitters and he has a mean tongue. Zophar is a legalist and he reckons he's on the inside track with God and knows all the answers. He is candid and hurtful. In verses 5-6 Zophar says, "Oh, how I wish that God would speak, that He would open His lips against you and disclose to you the secrets of wisdom, for true wisdom has two sides. Know this: God has even forgotten some of your sin." Zophar is insinuating that Job is being let off lightly. He even suggests that Job is lying when he says he's innocent. "Surely God recognises deceitful men?" (verse 11) Zophar's problem is that he thinks you can pour life into a test tube and it will always come out a certain way. He's very dogmatic and provokes a sarcastic response from Job.

Job replies, "Doubtless you are the people, and wisdom will die with you! But I have a mind as well as you; I am not inferior to you. Who does not know all these things?" Job has been stung by the attacks of his friends and their insults. Eliphaz called him 'a fool'; Bildad called him 'godless' and Zophar said he had no more sense than a donkey (chapter 11 verse 12). The effect of their hostile counselling is that instead of leading Job to self-judging, he keeps on vindicating himself. As soon as he becomes defensive and justifies himself, he is not justifying God.

Job says he has become a mere laughing stock, though righteous and blameless' (chapter 12 verse 4). He's fed up with the religious guesswork of his three colleagues, as is clear from chapter 13 verses 3-5. Job says, 'I desire to speak to the Almighty and to argue my case with God. You, however, smear me with lies! You are worthless physicians all of you! If only you would be altogether silent! For you, that would be wisdom.' Job instinctively knows that God's not like the picture his friends are painting.

He may not know what is going on or why, but he does know they are wrong. Job says, "Will you speak wickedly on God's behalf? Will you speak deceitfully for Him?" (chapter 13 verse 7).

From Job, every now and then, comes a great flash of faith. His circumstances are appalling, his skin is broken and festering, his friends wind him up, but suddenly

he declares, "Though He slay me, yet will I hope in Him; I will surely defend my ways to His face" (verse 15). This is Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego faith. This is Job's response under enormous pressure. God is still my only hope.

Job says he'll go into the presence of God and defend himself there. He'll lose his case. But he's not the only person who has wanted to tell God a thing or two in a personal encounter. How arrogant we people of the world are. One can understand Job's frustration, when he asks for a showdown with God, but this isn't the wisest move. Job is angry, hurting and frightened by the terrible things he has experienced. He wants to know 'Why do You hide Your face and consider me Your enemy?' (verse 24) He asks God, "Will You torment a wind-blown leaf?" (verse 25). He senses that God is stalking him (verse 27).

Here's the curious thing. At the very time Job feels abandoned by God and heaven is silent, he was actually getting direct, almost microscopic scrutiny from Him. He was, in Philip Yancey's words, 'participating in a trial of cosmic significance, not as the prosecuting attorney, but as the main witness in a test of faith.'

Chapter 14 begins with Job's classic remark, "Man born of woman is of few days and full of trouble. He springs up like a flower and withers away; like a fleeting shadow, he does not endure." His feelings are all over the place. At times he wishes he were dead: "If only You would hide me in the grave" (verse 13) - the pain is so unbearable. At other times faith rises and he wonders, "If a man dies, will he live again? All the days of my hard service I will wait for my renewal to come. You will call and I will answer You; You will long for the creature Your hands have made" (verses 14-15). Then, his mood changes, and he accuses God of destroying man's hope (verse 19). Self-pity resurfaces as he feels the pain of his own body and mourns for himself (verse 22). He's like a boxer who is punch-drunk. He's been in the ring with Satan and he's had three rounds with his friends whom he had expected would be on his side. But, against all the odds, he still believes God is a good God. That's the truth, though the facts cry out. 'How can He be?' What a paradox! No wonder Job's story still speaks volumes worldwide 3,000 or 4,000 years after it was written.

Job

5

A great personal tragedy has struck the family of Job, like a tsunami. His three friends, instead of being comforters, have become debaters attempting to gain an intellectual victory over him. They didn't speak of a God of mercy and grace, but only of a God of law. They brought in experience and tradition and legalism, but not the truth. It's the truth that sets men free. Job feels he's just rotting away (chapter 13 verse 28). This talking shop is only making him feel worse because he can't see any point to his suffering at all. You can imagine them glaring at one another during their intellectual Olympics. Job's wounds bleed, his sores still run, but none of his friends bring him any oil or balm.

In chapter 15 Eliphaz, the voice of experience, declares, "'All his days the wicked man suffers torment' (verse 20). He states 'Distress and anguish fill him with terror; they overwhelm him, like a king poised to attack, because he shakes his fist at God and vaunts himself against the Almighty defiantly charging against Him with a thick strong shield'" (verses 24-26). He insinuates that because Job is in torment, distress and anguish, and overwhelmed, he therefore must be wicked.

This provokes an immediate response from Job, tired of listening to long-winded speeches. He says, "I also could speak like you, if you were in my place; I could make fine speeches against you and shake my head at you. But my mouth would encourage you; comfort from my lips would bring you relief." Remember that Job never mentions Satan. He doesn't know what's at stake in this fiery trial and assumes that God Himself is delivering all these blows for no reason. Little wonder then that Job reacts as he does in chapter 16.

"Surely, O God, You have worn me out; You have devastated my entire household" (verse 7). He says that God assails him and tears him in His anger; he says, "All was well with me but He shattered me; He seized me by the neck and crushed me" (verse 12). He feels as if he's been made God's target and relentlessly he's being fired at. Listen to Job's description of himself in verses 16 and 17. "My face is red with weeping, deep shadows ring my eyes; yet my hands have been free of violence and my prayer is pure."

Again, out of the depths of Job's pain and grief, there arises another heart cry for an advocate. Here is another flash of insight as he calls for a mediator. He says, "Even now my witness is in heaven; my advocate is on high. My intercessor is my friend as my eyes pour out tears to God; on behalf of a man he pleads with God as a man pleads for his friend" (verses 19-21). Is this an Old Testament cry for Messiah, our Advocate and intercessor?

It's a blue day when Job declares, "My spirit is broken, my days are cut short, the grave awaits me" (chapter 17 verse 1). He's gaunt, mocked and misunderstood. People spit in his face, his eyes have grown dim with grief and his whole frame is

but a shadow (verse 7). He feels absolutely shattered and in desperation cries, "Who can see any hope for me?" (verse 15).

Job wants to know of his so-called friends. "How long will you torment me and crush me with words" (chapter 19 verse 1). He feels flattened by their heartless comments. For instance, Bildad in chapter 18 has just urged him to be sensible and not tear himself to pieces in his anger. But they are all pointing the finger of accusation at Job and urging him to come clean. Their belief is that bad things don't happen to good people, so Job, own up. What have you been up to, unknown to all but God?

There are vital lessons to learn here. Remember it was Job's righteousness that got him into trouble, not his unrighteousness. His comforters preach condemnation to him. They lecture him according to their religious formulas, but they are built on wrong premises. They major in half-truths, which have no application to Job's personal situation. His friends - rigid Eliphaz, unfeeling Bildad and merciless Zophar - could not conceive it possible that God had entangled Job in His net and left His action unexplained. Their efforts to account for 'the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune' that fell upon Job only made matters worse.

In one sense Job didn't want explanations as much as he needed acceptance, empathy and some tender loving care. The last thing he needed, battered and bruised as he was by life turned sour, was supposed friends verbally assaulting him. Their abuse was appalling. It's challenging to see how Job's friends spoke so knowingly about God when, in the end, God revealed that they really didn't know what they were talking about.

Emotionally his three friends were like the priest and the Levite 'passing by on the other side.' They failed spectacularly to identify with Job's situation, feel his agony, or understand his perplexity. His 'comforters' were not overwhelmed by the heaviness of his suffering. It didn't move them, after the shock of the first week. They didn't feel the bitterness of it. People going through stuff need words of encouragement to feed their spirit and give them strength and hope. Job was hungry for love and compassion. Prolonged and intense suffering can make a person feel powerless to handle life. One can feel overtaken by hopelessness and uselessness, and not want to go on living.

However, there is another lesson to draw from the Book of Job. God prefers honest disagreement, to dishonest submission. Loud complainers, like Job, are not ignored. When confronted with inexplicable injustice, it is better to be irate then resigned. God is not scared of His children's outbursts.

Job

6

The book of Job so fascinated John Calvin that 159 of his 700 sermons centred on it. It is an absorbing account of a choice servant of God who wrestles with his theology in the light of experience. He defiantly clings to three fundamental truths, no matter how contradictory they seem. From his perspective suffering comes from God: God is just: I am innocent. He adamantly clings to faith in God though all the evidence looks contrary. His eyes have grown dim with grief, his blackened skin is peeling and his body burns with fever. He is in the painful grip of suffering. He is not a secret sinner, or a liar, or a hypocrite and he is not being punished for his sin or for anyone else's. He believes God is good and is dumbfounded as to why this is happening to him.

Job is busy justifying himself and at times he wanders almost to the edge of blasphemy. In chapter 19 from verse 6 he states plainly " ... God has wronged me and drawn His net around me. Though I cry, 'I've been wronged!' I get no response; though I call for help, there is no justice. He has blocked my way so that I cannot pass; He has shrouded my paths in darkness. He has stripped me of my honour and removed the crown from my head." Job knows he's done nothing to deserve the sky to fall on him and utterly ruin his life.

Picture the scene. Once he was the city's leading citizen, now he's sat on a landfill site, surrounded by refuse. His appearance is abhorrent - running sores and scabs, severe itching, alienated from his friends and family. Job says, "My breath is offensive to my wife; I am loathsome to my own brothers" (verse 17). His loved ones have turned against him and he's been reduced to 'skin and bones'. He pleads for his friends to show some compassion.

Then, suddenly, out of the depths of despair a flash of faith breaks forth. "Oh, that my words were recorded, that they were written on a scroll, that they were inscribed with an iron tool on lead, or engraved in rock forever! I know that my Redeemer lives and that in the end He will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see Him with my own eyes -I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me."

Now Zophar, one of his colleagues, feels he really must share something and he gives Job another verbal kicking. Zophar's comments in chapter 20 are very dogmatic. In essence he declares, "There's a fate allotted by God to the wicked. It is their heritage. 'The joy of the godless lasts but a moment' (verse 5). 'In the midst of his plenty, distress will overtake him; the full force of misery will come upon him. When he has filled his belly, God will vent His burning anger against him and rain down his blows upon him' (verses 22-23). If you, Job, have experienced these terrors, then it must be because you're wicked. So admit it and own up."

Job feels no one is really listening to him. He needed acceptance and compassion, more than he needed advice. He needed people holding him, rather

than scolding him. I like the phrase 'the theology of accompaniment' - being alongside people who are hurting not because you can supply the answers, but because you care. That's why you can sit where they sit, weep with those who weep and just be there for them. Job has discovered, from personal experience, that bad things do happen to good people. Like others, in the Old Testament, he's annoyed that the wicked prosper. He asks in chapter 21, "Why do the wicked live on, growing old and increasing in power? (verse 7) Their homes are safe and free from fear; the rod of God is not on them. (verse 9). They spend their years in prosperity and go down to the grave in peace. Yet they say to God, 'Leave us alone! We have no desire to know Your ways. (verses 13-14)"

One can sense Job's mounting passion as he warms to his theme. He asks, "How often is the lamp of the wicked snuffed out? How often does calamity come upon them, the fate God allots in His anger? How often are they like straw before the wind, like chaff swept away by a gale?" (verses 17-18). One identifies utterly with the unspoken answer- not often enough! Job is challenging Zophar to think out of the box. He's too dogmatic. Life doesn't run along the rigid tramlines he has laid down. Job asks, "Have you never questioned those who travel? Have you paid no regard to their accounts - that the evil man is spared from the day of calamity, that he is delivered from the day of wrath?" (verses 29-30). The nonsense Zophar has been propounding doesn't help, because it isn't true.

Eliphaz, the voice of experience and religion, joins in the debate once more. He taunts Job, "Can a man be of benefit to God? Can even a wise man benefit Him? What pleasure would it give the Almighty if you were righteous? What would He gain if your ways were blameless?" (chapter 22 verses 2-3). Eliphaz assumes that God couldn't care less what Job does. How utterly wrong he is.

At the end of the book it's manifestly clear that Job's faith gained for God a great victory over Satan, who had questioned the entire human experiment.

A central message of Job is 'how we respond matters.' As Philip Yancey writes, "Our choices of faith matter not just to us and our own destiny, but, amazingly, to God Himself." So this is not the time to quit or give up, but to stand and, having done all, stand firm. Your old creed may be systematically destroyed, your precious doctrines shaken to their very foundations, as happened to Job, but trust God and let the living faith within you keep breaking out, against the odds, and for His glory. Did not God promise, "I will honour those, who honour Me?"

Job

7

Some have suggested that the book of Job is a great book from which to teach repentance. They argue that although Job was very conscious of God, he could find nothing wrong with himself. He was very egotistical about his own righteousness. He felt that before God he was all right. They claim that God allowed Job to be stripped of all his securities in order to bring him to Himself. God selected the best man who ever lived in the Old Testament and showed that even he needed to repent. It is true that, in the final chapter, after God has shown up, that His servant, Job says, "My ears have heard of You but now my eyes have seen You. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes" (chapter 42 verses 5-6).

When studying a book like Job, whilst acknowledging that the Bible is the inspired word of God, we need to understand that not all that every person says is automatically true. The old song runs "things that you're liable to read in the Bible - t'ain't necessarily so!" This is where Job's comforters need watching closely. Half-truths are very dangerous. Eliphaz is a good example. He says some fine things in chapter 22. They just don't apply to Job at all. Eliphaz says, "Submit to God and be at peace with Him; in this way prosperity will come to you. Accept instruction from His mouth and lay up His words in your heart. If you return to the Almighty, you will be restored" (verses 21-23). None of this is relevant to Job.

Judgemental Eliphaz has assumed that Job must have sinned appallingly to warrant such disaster striking his family. He actually paints a picture of Job as a heartless, uncaring scoundrel who has kept 'to the old path that evil men have trod' (verse 15). The reality is that what has happened, happened when Job was submitted to God and at peace with Him, having laid up His words in his heart. He had not departed from the Almighty at all.

Job has really suffered from bad advice from his friends. He doesn't enjoy being lectured or preached at by clever men with no answers. Listen to his outcry in chapter 23: - "Even today my complaint is bitter; His hand is heavy in spite of my groaning. If only I knew where to find Him; if only I could go to His dwelling!" (verses 2-3). He longs to have it out with God. Job sighs, "If I go to the east, He is not there; if I go to the west, I do not find Him. When He is at work in the north, I do not see Him; when He turns to the south, I catch no glimpse of Him. But He knows the way that I take; when He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold." (verses 8-10). Remember Job's life was pleasing to God before he went into the furnace. These traumatic events are not occurring to teach Job a lesson. When he says, "My feet have closely followed His steps; I have kept to His way without turning aside. I have not departed from the commands of His lips; I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my daily bread" (verses 11-12), he is telling the plain truth.

Out of the painful darkness of Job's situation, again a flash of faith shines forth, "He knows the way that I take; when He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold" (verse 10). Job's declaring, 'I don't know where God is, but God knows where I am.' In times of severe testing it's not where you are, but who you're with that is most important.

Job asks two questions at the start of chapter 24. "Why does the Almighty not set times for judgement? Why must those who know Him look in vain for such days?" (verse 1). Job is desperately pleading for the day of judgement to occur tomorrow because there's so much wrong that seems to go unnoticed by God. Verse 12 reads, "The groans of the dying rise from the city, and the souls of the wounded cry out for help. But God charges no one with wrongdoing."

Job is convinced that God is against him. If Job had known that God was using him as a weapon to defeat Satan, he could have possibly sat back and waited trustfully for the battle to end. He would have seen a purpose in his suffering. As it is, his suffering seems pointless and meaningless which only serves to make it more intolerable. All Job could give the Lord was his senseless suffering by faith; but that is just what God wanted in order to silence the devil. In times of severe testing, perhaps our first question should not be, "How can I get out of this?" but "What can I get out of this?"

In chapter 26 there are two marvellous verses I want to draw to your attention. The first is verse 7. With a revelation of divine insight Job declares that God "spreads out the northern skies over empty space; He suspends the earth over nothing." What an incredible statement of scientific accuracy, from probably 4,000 years ago, when this concept was unknown to ancient astronomers. Then at the end of the chapter in verse 14, aware that God's ways and works are past finding out, Job says, "these are but the outer fringe of His works; how faint the whisper we hear of Him! Who then can understand the thunder of His power?"

Job is only too conscious of the limitations of our understanding of divine power and wisdom. It's alarming to realise his friends pretended to have complete understanding of God's ways. Their attempts at being God's defence counsel fail utterly. In fact God is as much searching out their integrity as they claim He is for Job.

Lord, give us humility, like Job, to admit when we haven't a clue what's going on in people's lives lest we invent an explanation that is religious guesswork and misrepresents You.

Job

8

Like many Old Testament prophets Job is angry with the perpetrators of injustice, but he's equally cross with God for, as it appears, letting them prosper and get away with it. Is God indifferent to man's inhumanity to man? This isn't the way to run the world - 'Truth forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne.'

Chapter 27 opens with Job arguing that God has denied him justice. His friends are not connecting with him at all, he will not deny his own integrity and in verse 6 he states, "I will maintain my righteousness and never let go of it."

Chapter 28 is a song in praise of wisdom - a rather unexpected interlude in this tense debate on the city dump. Of course, there are some nuggets of truth in this section such as 'the price of wisdom is beyond rubies' (verse 18) and "God said to man, 'The fear of the Lord - that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding'" (verse 28).

Job now continues his discourse and he thinks of the good old days. Those were the days, my friend, we thought they'd never end! Chapter 29 verses 2-5, "How I long for the months gone by, for the days when God watched over me, when His lamp shone upon my head and by His light I walked through darkness. Oh, for the days when I was in my prime, when God's intimate friendship blessed my house, when the Almighty was still with me and my children were around me."

The air is soggy with nostalgia as he reminisces. He remembers when he was somebody, highly respected and listened to by young and old alike. "Whoever heard me spoke well of me, and those who saw me commended me, because I rescued the poor who cried for help, and the fatherless who had none to assist him" (verse 11-12). He recalls his acts of compassion and kindness to widows, the blind, the lame, the needy and the stranger. His dream was to die in his own house 'my days as numerous as the grains of sand' (verse 18). He recollects how his counsel was eagerly awaited and respected. "I dwelt as a king among his troops; I was like one who comforts mourners" (verse 25). Has self-pity overtaken him? In verse 25 of chapter 29 he has said I or me fifty one times. He's wrapped up in himself and boasts about the outstanding man he was.

Then it happened - a sudden reversal of fortune - "Now they mock me, men younger than I" (chapter 30 verse 1). He feels humiliated having become a joke in their eyes. Job states, "Now that God has unstrung my bow and afflicted me, they throw off restraint in my presence (verse 11) . . . Terrors overwhelm me; my dignity is driven away as by the wind, my safety vanishes like a cloud. And now my life ebbs away; days of suffering grip me" (verses 15-16). Job feels abandoned because of the silence of God. Why won't You say something, Lord? Job becomes angry as if provoking God to end His silence. This servant of God is hurting. "I cry out to You, O God, but you do not answer; I stand up, but You merely look at me. You turn on me ruthlessly; with the might of Your hand You

attack me. You snatch me up and drive me before the wind; You toss me about in the storm" (verses 20-22).

Job is all churned up, his body burning with fever (verse 30). Because his hope was dead, Job's song was a funeral dirge. His harp and flute were tuned to a minor key (verse 31). He felt so utterly alone in his suffering. At times God permits His children to experience darkness on a dead-end street where they don't know which way to turn. He feels like a trapped animal - worthless, humiliated, bereft of honour and authority.

In chapter 31 Job sums up his final defence. Sixteen times he uses "If I have ... statements, suggesting "I know I haven't" and therefore there's no case to answer. Taken out of context, one would think Job is very self-righteous. He declares he's not deceitful or lustful; he is not unjust or selfish; he hasn't put his trust in material possessions or worshipped any false god; he hasn't gloated at his enemy's misfortune. He sighs deeply in verse 35: "Oh, that I had someone to hear me. I sign now my defence - let the Almighty answer me." Job is saying, in effect, let judgement fall, if God can prove me wrong. He longs to be vindicated and his reputation restored. At times he indulged in the death wish, but not until he's set the record straight. Jesus suffered even worse than Job and died and let God vindicate Him.

Job's comforters have dried up. Rigid Eliphaz has stopped pontificating, unfeeling Bildad, the champion of orthodoxy, falls silent, and so does merciless Zophar. Job feels God has demoralised him. His very theology is being rocked, but let's pause for a moment and reflect a little.

There was a rich faith operative in Job's life before any of his sufferings occurred. When trouble strikes and questions are many, we shouldn't let what we don't know disturb what we do know. In this Job stood firm. ' He still believed God is a good God; he still kept his integrity and refused to be bullied in the 3 against 1 debating sessions into admitting he deserved what was happening and must have brought it on himself.

Life is not television. You can't switch to another channel when something's going on you don't like. A survivor from Auschwitz said, "We owe God our lives for the few or many years we live and we have the duty to worship Him and do as He commands us. That's what we're here on earth for, to be in God's service, to do God's bidding." Unwittingly, that is exactly where Job stood - in God's service, doing God's bidding.

Job's faith is remarkable, not logical. He runs to the arms of the very God (my vindicator) whom he accuses of causing him so much damage. As Philip Yancey writes, "Job's faith survived with no outside help or explanation."

Job

9

As Job's comforters attack him verbally, it brings out the worst in him and drives him into God. He keeps on vindicating himself, but while he is justifying himself, he's actually blaming God. Some have argued that pride is Job's problem, only he can't see it. He was 'righteous in his own eyes' (chapter 32 verse 1). The three friends found no answer, because there was no answer. Only God can answer a self-righteous man.

Job is tired of screaming in the dark. He's challenged God to vindicate him or sentence him, but God is silent. There's no fire, no voice. God doesn't appear just because somebody thinks it's time for a showdown.

Now an angry young man joins in the debate. He 'became very angry with Job for justifying himself rather than God' (chapter 32 verse 2). He is also cross with the three friends who had condemned Job. His name is Elihu. He takes up twice the space of any other speaker, including God. He's very self-opinionated and everyone ignores him. However, long-winded though he is, his explanation of God's character - that He is gracious, just and great - is worthy of consideration.

Elihu declares, "God is greater than man" (chapter 33 verse 12). God doesn't need to report back to any board. He is not responsible to any group, nor is He subject to public opinion. God doesn't have to give an answer to us: He is not accountable to us.

I guess we all need to trust God more - in the darkness, when no reasons are forthcoming. He has not promised to explain everything to us but this great God has asked us to trust Him. Elihu declares, "Far be it from God to do evil, from the Almighty to do wrong" (chapter 34 verse 10). "It is unthinkable that God would do wrong, that the Almighty would pervert justice" (chapter 34 verse 12). Then he asks, "Will you condemn the just and mighty One?" (chapter 34 verse 17). Job seriously believes God's got it wrong. He's surely made a big mistake where Job is concerned. Of course, Job doesn't know that it is Satan who is responsible for all these disasters, but God is permitting them for purposes never revealed to God's servant, Job.

In fact, God uses Job to prove to Satan that a human's faith can be genuine and selfless, not dependent on God's good gifts. Job acts as if God's integrity is on trial. Elihu scoffs at Job in chapter 35 verses 6-8: "If you sin, how does that affect Him? If your sins are many, what does that do to Him? If you are righteous, what do you give to Him or what does He receive from your hand? Your wickedness affects only a man like yourself, and your righteousness only the sons of men."

Actually, Elihu is flat wrong when he says, "If you sin, how does that affect God?" We are God's exhibit A, His demonstration piece to the powers in the unseen world, as Philip Yancey puts it. One person's faith does make a difference. Our

choices of faith matter, not just to us and our own destiny, but amazingly to God Himself. C. S. Lewis put it this way: "There is no neutral ground in the universe; every square inch, every split second, is claimed by God and counter claimed by Satan."

In one sense Elihu did help Job whose actions may have been right - he was not the sinner the three comforters depicted - but his attitude was wrong. He was not the saint he thought he was. He was slowly moving towards a defiant self-righteous attitude. This 'know it all' attitude God exposed and destroyed, when He appeared to Job.

By now, a storm was brewing over the horizon. Elihu asks some searching questions: "Do you know how God controls the clouds and makes His lightning flash?" (chapter 37 verse 15). Elihu says, "No one can look at the sun, bright as it is in the skies" (chapter 37 verse 21), yet you want to meet God face to face and prepare a court case in your self-defence.

The four men have had their say. The answer to Job's problems is not an explanation about God, but a revelation of God. The Lord answered Job out of the storm. In fact, when God displayed His awesome majesty and greatness, it humbled Job and brought him to the place of silent submission. God's answer to Job's predicament is Himself. Job has asked so many questions, now it's God's turn. The Lord asks seventy-seven questions and this interrogation made Job realize his own inadequacy and inability to meet God as an equal and defend his cause. Job was convinced his speeches had been filled with wisdom and knowledge, but God's first question put paid to that delusion. The Living Bible paraphrase puts chapter 38 verse 2 like this: "Why are you using your ignorance to deny My providence?"

Job has been viewing the world and reality from a worm's eye view and it's unfair and incomprehensible. God invites him to a divine eye view of the universe. There's an interesting verse in Deuteronomy chapter 29 verse 29. It says, "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law." God Himself has put serious limitations on our ability to understand. As Philip Yancey writes, "He has revealed much and hidden much that we might learn humility in our search for truth." No explanation is given Job for suffering so cruelly. "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part, then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known (1 Corinthians chapter 13 verse 12).

God's questions put things into a clear perspective for Job. Though not able to understand - he's not been given any answers - he was able to stand. His limited range of vision and the searing pain have combined to distort reality. God now gives His servant Job a glimpse of the big picture. That must be all for now. Next time we will look at Job chapter 38.

Job

10

We've reached one of the greatest chapters in the Bible – chapter 38 of Job. The Lord answered Job out of the storm and it's immediately apparent that when God plays the question master and starts asking the questions, Job has to 'pass' on every one because he just does not know the answers. God enquires of Job whether he can explain God's creation:

"Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell Me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone – while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?" (verses 4-7).

With holy irony, even with sarcasm, God blasts Job with a hail of questions which puncture his pride and magnify the gap between man's tiny worldview and God's cosmic perspective.

The questioning is relentless. "Who shut up the sea behind doors when it burst forth from the womb (verse 8), when I said, 'This far you may come and no farther; here is where your proud waves halt?'" (verse 11). Had Job ever told the sun to rise to dispel the darkness? Had Job ever walked in the depths of the sea? In places the Pacific is nearly seven miles deep! Had Job ever been shown the gates of death? The vastness of creation causes Job to realise the Creator is in a different league from the created.

God's questions keep coming. "What is the way to the abode of light? And where does darkness reside? Can you take them to their places? Do you know the paths to their dwellings? Surely you know, for you were already born! You have lived so many years!" (verses 19-21).

Little man is a Johnny-come-lately on the earth and is no match for the Ancient of Days. God wants Job to answer. Do you know where snow and hail are stored until God needs them? Do you know where God keeps His lightning and winds? What do you know about the rain, the ice and the frost? Are you the rainmaker, Job? Can you control the constellations, Pleiades or Orion? The bigness of God is overwhelming Job. More unanswerable questions fly at him. "Do you send the lightning bolts on their way? Do they report to you, 'Here we are'? Who endowed the heart with wisdom or gave understanding to the mind? Who has the wisdom to count the clouds? Who can tip over the water jars of the heavens when the dust becomes hard and the clods of earth stick together?" (Verses 35-38).

Job catches a glimpse of the big picture. His questions are not being answered, but that doesn't seem to matter any more. The Answer to all things, namely God, is addressing him. The silence has ended. Job realises he could never oversee God's massive creation and now God speaks about His remarkable providence.

Job

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Who feeds the wild animals? It isn't you, Job. Six animals are mentioned – the lions, mountain goats, the doe, the wild donkey, the wild ox and the warhorse. Five birds are mentioned – the raven, the ostrich, the stork, the hawk and the eagle. God is asking Job, "Do you understand how they live or know how to take care of them? Would you even know if they were hungry? Do you know when the mountain goats give birth?" (Chapter 39 verse 1) "Does the hawk take flight by your wisdom and spread his wings towards the south? Does the eagle soar at your command and build his nest on high? He dwells on a cliff and stays there at night; a rocky crag is his stronghold. From there he seeks out his food; his eyes detect it from afar." (Verses 26-29).

We're not at the end of the book yet, but there are a couple of important lessons we can learn from the story so far. The first is this. When confronted with inexplicable injustice and crushing darkness, it is better to be irate, than resigned. Job felt betrayed by God, but he is never censured by God for his uncontrolled outbursts. Loud complainers like Job, Jeremiah and Jonah seem to grab God's attention and He is willing to engage with them. God prefers honest disagreement and even furious interrogation, to passivity, dishonest submission or simply settling for religious guesswork. Job's strong remarks scandalised his friends, but God remained unperturbed. As Philip Yancey says, "One bold message in Job is that you can say anything to God. Job wavered, contradicted himself, backtracked and sometimes collapsed in despair, but it never occurred to him to ignore God."

In the final analysis, Job's four friends emerge as self-righteous dogmatists as they try to defend the mysterious ways of God, forgetting that God is vaster than any creed or doctrine and His ways are past finding out.

Secondly, when God seemed completely absent, in one sense, He had never been more present. Job's experience had been, to quote from Isaiah chapter 45 verse 15, "Truly You are a God who hides Himself, O God and Saviour of Israel." Actually, far from being abandoned by God, Job was getting direct, almost microscopic scrutiny from Him. Though oblivious of what was going on behind the scenes, Job was participating in a trial of cosmic significance. Little did he know that the part he was playing in this classic test of faith was not, as he supposed, the prosecuting attorney but the main witness.

Job

11

By the time we reach chapter 40 God has taken Job on a rapid tour of the universe, firing a multitude of questions to which Job has no answers. A carnival of the animals has been highlighted and Job realises he's no match for God.

Then the Lord asked Job if he was going to correct the Almighty. God wants His accuser to give an answer. Job realises he's such a lightweight in this situation. It dawns on him there's no contest. God is supreme. Job says, "I am unworthy – how can I reply to You? I put my hand over my mouth. I spoke once, but have no answer – twice, but I will say no more" (verses 4-5).

Then the Lord spoke to Job out of the storm again. In essence, God invites Job to take over the universe and have a go at being God. There's a rich irony here as God says, "Do you have an arm like God's, and can your voice thunder like His? Then adorn yourself with glory and splendour, and clothe yourself in honour and majesty. Unleash the fury of your wrath, look at every proud man and bring him low, look at every proud man and humble him, crush the wicked where they stand." (verses 9-12)

It's almost as if God is teasing Job until it registers with him how proud he has been to suppose that he could out argue God and accuse Him of any wrong doing. God mentions two of His creations – both of which scare Job – the hippopotamus and the crocodile. Could Job rule over them, let alone the entire cosmos?

In verse 15 God says, "Look at the behemoth – (that's generally understood to be the hippopotamus) – which I made along with you and which feeds on grass like an ox. What strength he has in his loins, what power in the muscles of his belly!" (verse 16). The hippo with its huge body size weighs up to three tons, has comically short legs, yet can outrun a man. It has protruding eyes and nostrils and yet it is the object of God's care and "ranks first among the works of God" (verse 19). How would you cope, Job? Apparently a hippo can run faster than a man!

In the presence of God, Job has nothing to say. He had a million questions to ask God, but when he met Him, they all fled his mind. It really doesn't matter anymore. Is this the same man who declared he was a righteous man and therefore there must be something wrong with God to let this happen to him?

There are universal lessons to learn here. Until we are silenced before God, He cannot do for us what needs to be done. God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble. We must stop arguing with God and defending ourselves.

Job may have been silenced, but he's not yet submitted and that's why God asked (chapter 40 verse 8), "Would you discredit My injustice? Would you condemn Me

to justify yourself?" If Job can't subdue behemoth (Hebrew for 'a super beast'), could he master leviathan? Many commentators say this is the crocodile which weighs a ton and lives up to the age of forty. Job could hardly make a pet of him! Others suggest a half mythical creature like a fire breathing dragon. The root of the Hebrew word 'leviathan' means 'to twist or to writhe'. God says, "If you lay a hand on him, you will remember the struggle and never do it again! (chapter 41 verse 8). Who dares open the doors of his mouth, ringed about with his fearsome teeth?" (verse 14).

When God says in verse 11, "Everything under heaven belongs to Me", some think leviathan represents Satan and God is saying that this evil being who has sought to destroy you is under My control. Job was asked "Can you pull in the leviathan with a fishhook?" (chapter 41 verse 1) and it is obvious he can't. If he can't capture and subdue wild animals in God's creation, what hope has he of unravelling the mystery of life and the problem of evil? He's gone fishing with a pin hoping to contain the Pacific Ocean in a thimble! Job is beginning to get it. God's plan is profound, His creation magnificent, His ability to reign over all is awe-inspiring.

One of the great lessons to learn from this wonderful book is that God doesn't reveal His grand design, but He does reveal Himself. In effect He tells Job 'Until you know a little more about the physical universe, don't tell me my job, namely how to run a moral universe.' All Job's 'why' questions are not answered. Surely they are out of the reach of man's finite mind. No matter how we rationalize, God will sometimes seem unfair from our point of view. The perspective of an individual trapped in time and denied the big picture is always going to be eccentric. It's our limited range of vision that, like Job's, distorts reality. Philip Yancey writes, "The only thing that changed by chapter 42 was that God had given Job a glimpse of the big picture."

Job knows that in life, things happen. You can be doing everything right when, suddenly, everything goes wrong with no rhyme or reason. It's well expressed in Ecclesiastes chapter 9 verse 12, "Moreover, no man knows when his hour will come: as fish are caught in a cruel net, or birds are taken in a snare, so men are trapped by evil times that fall unexpectedly upon them."

Why human evil and its consequences are allowed such green lights by a holy God is another of life's bewildering paradoxes. There's a great book by Oswald Chambers on Job entitled "Baffled to Fight Better" and, taking the long view, 'treasures of darkness' were revealed to Job through his sufferings. Like Job, we may not get it, but that's the way it is!

Job

12

We have reached the end of this great work of literature, philosophy and theology – the book of Job. During his speeches thirty six times Job asked God to speak with him. God has spoken and Job knows he's beaten. He withdraws his accusations that God is unjust and unfair. He realizes that whatever God does is right and man must accept it by faith. He confesses his pride, humbles himself and repents. Listen to the opening of chapter 42 "Then Job replied to the Lord: 'I know that You can do all things; no plan of Yours can be thwarted. You asked, 'Who is this that obscures My counsel without knowledge?' Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know'" (verses 1-3).

A very different Job, humble and contrite admits, "My ears had heard of You but now my eyes have seen You. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes" (verses 5-6). Job has met God personally and seen himself in the light of His Maker. He realizes he is not Mr Mighty High, but 'dust and ashes'. He was called 'my servant Job' in chapter 1 verse 8. Now four times in two verses (7-8) God refers to Job as His servant. Job endured suffering; he did not curse God and thereby silenced the devil. He's learnt to trust God in torrid circumstances and has emerged an intercessor who prayed for his friends – something they never offered to do for him!

Job's comforters do not emerge from this drama smelling of roses. God is angry with them for misrepresenting Him. They are humbled by having to go to God's servant Job and ask him to pray for them!

Vernon McGee who taught that the book Job is a great book from which to teach repentance wrote this, "The minute you and I become self-righteous, you can be sure of one thing – we will be brought into the ring with God and He is going to bruise us --- to bring us to a realization of our sin and a spirit of humility". A by-product of suffering is that our lives are laid bare, utterly exposed. There is a loss of dignity and privacy in suffering: all our defences are down and we are vulnerable because what is in man raises its head. That's why Job is a good book to teach repentance.

There are important lessons to be learned from Job's hard-hearted friends. Pious platitudes are of no help to anyone and knowledge without wisdom can actually make matters worse. How much of our sermonizing actually misses the point? Eliphaz was so inflexible and sarcastic in answering the words of Job's lips that he failed utterly to respond to the pain in Job's heart. A child once defined sympathy as 'your pain in my heart.' Eliphaz knew nothing of this identification.

Verse 10 declares, "After Job had prayed for his friends, the Lord made him prosperous again and gave him twice as much as he had before." The story certainly has a happy ending. His friends and relatives brought money for a 'restoration fund' which Job may have used for purchasing breeders. His brothers

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and sisters and friends 'comforted and consoled him over all the trouble the Lord had brought upon him' (verse 11).

The Bible says, 'The Lord blessed the latter part of Job's life more than the first' (verse 12). All his livestock doubled, so he ends up with 14,000 sheep, 6,000 camels and 1,000 yoke of oxen and 1,000 donkeys. Ten of his children are in heaven and now he has ten more – 7 sons and 3 daughters.

The girls' names are listed – Jemimah means 'the day' and Matthew Henry comments she was called such because of the shining forth of his prosperity after a dark night of affliction. His second daughter, Keziah, is the name for a very fragrant smelling spice far removed from when Job was smelly and unsightly, an ugly figure on the village garbage dump. The third girl was called Keren-Happuch meaning 'Plenty Restored'. Job made his daughters co-heirs with their brethren. There's nothing new under the sun, not even equal opportunities. 'Nowhere in all the land were there found women as beautiful as Job's daughters' (verse 15).

The drama ends with these words, "After this, Job lived 140 years; he saw his children and their children to the fourth generation. And he died, old and full of years" (verse 16-17). That's how God's servant, a man of towering faith and heroic endurance, came to his grave like a shock of corn in his season.

According to Jewish tradition Job's trial lasted for seven years. It wasn't over in a month. Some suggest it occurred just as he was reaching retirement age and suddenly it's all gone wrong. Whenever it happened it floored Job completely, made him a social outcast and, worst of all, caused him to feel he'd lost touch with God. The spiritual isolation was devastating – to be crushed in spirit. He could identify with Isaiah's remark, "Truly You are a God who hides Himself" (Isaiah chapter 45 verse 15). The silence of heaven deepened his distress and all his dignity was blown away.

Perhaps, like Job, you find yourself in a no win situation, questioning where's God in all this? What's He playing at? Hear this. Cast yourself on the mercy of God. His mercies endure forever. You remember the good days before the crash and you say 'It's all different now'. Wrong! It's not all different. It's a different season, but God's not changed. God's not dead. God's not different. His love for you is as fervent and passionate as ever. Remember the penultimate verse in Job is: 'After this, Job lived . . . '(verse 16).

Job

13

Let's see if we can tease out some lessons for life from this incredible document, the book of Job. Whatever happened to Job, happened because God is good, never because God is not good. It happened because God was working out something ultimately beneficial in Job's life, not because God wanted to teach him a lesson.

We need to recognise how God's permissive will may move in our lives as believers. He can use cancer – though you want rid of it – bereavement (though you wish it hadn't happened) – redundancy, broken engagements, a messy divorce, even deportation to serve His greater glory. With hindsight – but only with hindsight – we can see the purpose in it and lessons are learned. It's most important not to let circumstances get between you and God.

When our world collapses, perhaps we're all prone, like Job, to become self-absorbed. Job is wrapped up in himself and becomes hard, hard as nails at times. Suffering can bring out the worst in us as well as, possibly, the best in us. Under the crushing weight of his enormous sufferings, Job's spiritual egotism came to light: his hidden inner life of self-sufficiency and self-righteousness surfaced.

There's a verse in Isaiah chapter 50 that spells out very clearly what Job was trying to do. It's verse 10, "Let him who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God."

The book of Job teaches me there really is a devil who is utterly vicious in his intentions. Satan is clearly not a free agent. God will only allow him enough rope with which to hang himself. God did not lose His divine wager with Satan.

When I'm tempted to think God is unjust in the way He's treating me – surely I deserve something better – I realize, because of my pride and sin, I deserve worse and it is only of His mercies that we are not consumed.

Chuck Swindoll reckons that the core message of Job is contained in chapter 42 verse 3 where Job says to God, "Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know." Chuck Swindoll says Job's story is about coming to the realization that God's plans are beyond our understanding and too deep to explain. We have to live with mystery and unanswered questions and trust God knows what He's doing. Justice long delayed annoys us but that's the way it is. All God's accounts are not settled at the end of the month. What bothers us is that God doesn't act like we think He ought to act.

The account of Job is the story of a man whose life and family were struck by a thunderbolt. His mind swirled with disbelief; he lost his bearings and couldn't think straight. Who in their right mind would dare to go to court with an opponent powerful enough to shake the earth, make the stars and walk on water?

Job

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Maybe you are in the prison of circumstances that leave you crushed and hopeless. Listen, believer, He's not lost the plot. He loves you and will perfect that which concerns you. He's still on your case. He knows why it's happening. He's too wise to make a mistake. He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

Confess your disappointment to God. If you feel He's let you down, say so. He knows how you feel anyway. The Bible never belittles human disappointment. Look at the proportions in Job – one chapter of restoration after 41 chapters of anguish and grief.

Philip Yancey, with great insight, writes, "Job stands as merely the most extreme example of what appears to be a universal law of faith. The kind of faith God values seems to develop best when everything fuzzes over, when God stays silent and the fog rolls in." Job emerged as a survivor who waited for the fog to lift. Remember working through is always more costly than walking out.

Perhaps the greatest mystery in suffering is how it can bring a person into the presence of God in a state of worship, and even acceptance with joy. Job never mentions Satan, much less gives him credit for what happened. As St. Augustine wrote, "Job did not say 'The Lord gave and the devil has taken away.'" Job's bottom line was to trust God in the darkest night, even when it didn't make sense.

Do we believe that nothing is going on without God's awareness and throughout the fiery ordeal, we're being reshaped in the whole purifying and humbling, refining process? How important it is to remember in the darkness what we have learned in the light. Pain can be positive rather than purposeless, when it is handed over to God. In our hands pain is a problem – in God's hands it is a possibility.

The Danish theologian, Søren Kierkegaard made the insightful statement, "The secret in Job, the vital force, the nerve, the idea is that Job, despite everything, is in the right." At the end of the book, God criticizes Job for only thing – his limited point of view. Philip Yancey argues that at the root, Job faced a crisis of faith, not of suffering. God re-focused the central issue from the cause of Job's suffering to his response. Looking backward – but only looking backward – we can see the advantage Job gained by continuing to trust God. Believer, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct your paths" (Proverbs chapter 3 verses 5-6).