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A Meditation on the Book of Job



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The book of Job to many is an eastern tale which bears very little relation to everyday life and is therefore left severely alone. Remembering that all scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable it is our privilege as well as our duty to include in our reading the apparently obscure portions as well as those parts which seem more easily understood.

In the first chapter the curtain is drawn aside and we are allowed to listen to a conversation between God and Satan, the subject being the conduct of a man on earth.

God speaks highly of his servant Job: "A perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God and escheweth evil." Satan immediately replied that Job had an ulterior motive in living as he did; was he not the special object of God's care and protection, blessed with material things more than most men. In a word it paid Job to serve God, but argued Satan if those special blessings were withdrawn he would curse God to his face. What follows is God's answer to Satan's allegations. In spite of every adversity, Job, in the main, stood the test and when deprived of everything could say, "The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord" (Ch. 1: 20) and later under severe pressure said of God, "Though he slay me yet will I trust in him (Ch. 15: 13).

We do not here speak of the further and more complete revelation of God in the New Testament. This is not the subject of the book, not God in grace, but God in government, though of course there are glimpses of New Testament truth in the book. Nor do we rule out the fact that some do apparently serve God because it pays; some followed the Lord for the loaves and fishes, but not all. We have here the mystery of God's permissive will, knowing that to every evil tide he has still the power to say, "Hitherto shalt thou come and no further." We learn that Satan has power, but within bounds, and of that power he will eventually be stripped.

So, now, we take a look at Job not only bereft of all he had but sorely afflicted with pain of the worst kind. Three of his friends come to “comfort” him, but far from so doing they add to his mental suffering by the things they say.

Their contention was that he must have sinned in some secret way, otherwise the calamities which overtook him could not be explained. The happenings of the first chapter were not known to them nor yet to Job for that matter. It has pleased God to leave them on record for men of all generations that they might have a glimpse of something outside the mundane things of life and that they might realise the existence of higher spiritual powers. We learn that what goes on in the spiritual sphere is not unconnected with the everyday things of life. It has been well said that we only know enough to let us see how very little we do know. It is interesting to follow the arguments of Job’s three friends. They all began with the same premise: suffering could only be the result of sin. This of course in a general sense is true. Had there been no sin there would have been no suffering, but the application of this principle to any individual case is dangerous. Every case must be judged on its own merits. This question comes up from time to time in the New Testament—as for instance in John (Ch. 9) when the Lord Jesus healed the blind man. “Who did sin that this man was born blind?” The Lord’s answer showed that his blindness could not be laid specifically at the door of any individual “but that the works of God might be manifest in him.”

On the other hand going back to Chapter 5 the Lord heals a man at the pool and to him he said, “Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon thee” thus indicating that his sin had caused his infirmity in the first place. Or again in Luke 15 the prodigal’s sufferings were without doubt the result of his own folly, while in Chapter 16 we have Lazarus in a worse condition than the prodigal and who would dare say it was his fault. Over Luke 15 we might write, “The way of transgressors is hard,” while in the other case “Many are the afflictions of the righteous”—and both would be true.

We do not here dwell on the sequence of these two instances

but use them to show how careful we should be in determining the cause of suffering in any individual case.

We should be quick to discern God's governmental hand in our own lives, but be very careful how we judge others in affliction or adversity.

Job's "friends" were not so very careful, but with a dogmatism ill suited to the sad circumstance they all maintained that Job though outwardly pious must be hiding some secret sin—hence his sufferings.

Eliphaz, the first to speak, began by reminding Job that he had helped others; had he not strengthened the weak hands and the feeble knees, but now when affliction touches himself he cannot just accept it. Furthermore, "Who ever perished being innocent, or where were the righteous cut off? Even as I have seen, they that plow iniquity and sow wickedness, shall reap the same" (Ch. 4: 7-8). (How "comforting" to poor Job.)

Eliphaz began his accusations in a sort of abstract way but ere he finished his third discourse he very directly accused Job of the meanest of actions (Ch. 22: 6); all entirely untrue for he had ever been a champion of the oppressed, a benefactor to the poor (Ch. 29: 15-16).

And yet the wonderful thing is that while these three men were wrong in their assessment of Job, they said many things which were true in a general way but did not apply to the case in question. Is it not sometimes the case that when we are anxious to prove something, to get something over, as men say, we quote all the scriptures that seem to suit, but the application may be all out of place. Satan, when tempting the Lord Jesus, quoted from the 91st Psalm assuring Christ of divine protection, a sweet promise indeed to the righteous, but out of place in the context. How wisely the Lord answered, "It is written again, thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God" (Luke 4: 10-12). Before that chapter ends the Lord does experience the promise of Psalm 91 for he was divinely preserved when they would have cast him over the brow of the hill (Luke 4: 29).

Eliphaz continues his discourse stating many facts already well known to Job; stating many truisms which did not meet Job's case or ease his pain. "He taketh the wise in their own craftiness," says Eliphaz (Ch. 5: 13). If he meant that Job was a crafty man but God had found him out he was mistaken. Yet Paul uses these very words when speaking to the worldly-wise Corinthians (I Cor. 3: 19), and here the words were most appropriate.

Again he uses words which, in substance, correspond with Hebrews 12. Happy is the man whom God correcteth therefore despise not thou the chastening of the Lord (Ch. 5).

The writer in Hebrews 12 assures all under discipline that it is a sign of God's love, not his wrath; it is whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth—that we might be partakers of his holiness. Of course, it only yieldeth the peaceable fruits of righteousness to them who are exercised thereby (Heb. 12: 11).

When James would exhort us to be patient under suffering he takes up Job as the great example. Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and ye have seen the end of the Lord; He is pitiful and of tender mercy (Jas. 5: 11).

Yet Job was but human and he longed for a word of comfort, but no such word was forthcoming; instead of sympathy it was censure all the time. It never helps a man in suffering to tell him it is his own fault (he generally knows that) but to tell an innocent man he is suffering for his sins must be to him bitterness of soul. Sympathy is one of the greatest graces of the Christian faith and there are always those in need of it. How this marked the Lord in the days of his flesh as, for example, John 11. Tears of sympathy at the grave of Lazarus. Incidentally he is still the sympathising Jesus—

"Touched with a sympathy within
He knows our feeble frame
He knows what sore temptations are
For he endured the same."

Toward the end of his speaking Eliphaz says, "Acquaint now thyself with God and be at peace, thereby good shall come

unto thee” (Ch. 22: 21). Lovely words, sound theology, words which have formed the basis of many a gospel address but Chapter 1 would teach us that Job already knew God, perhaps more so than Eliphaz. He was preaching to the converted.

Bildad begins his discourse by apparently justifying the ways of God. He asks the question, “Doth God pervert judgment? Doth the Almighty pervert justice?” It seems a very pertinent question. In substance it resembles the words of Paul in Romans 9. “Is there unrighteousness with God.” The answer is God forbid. Paul is here speaking of God’s sovereignty, his right of choice, but whatever God does must be righteous, for he is a righteous God. The answer to Bildad’s question is definitely “No.” God was righteous in allowing Job to suffer; it was the exercise of his permissive will, with a definite purpose in view as seen in Chapter 1. As for Job’s children, they must have transgressed and were consequently cut off for their sin (Ch. 8: 4). This, of course, was merely assumption as Scripture does not say so. Bildad saw in nature the law of cause and effect—Can the rush grow up without mire, or the flag without water (Ch. 8: 11). Therefore, if Job suffered and if his children died there must of necessity be an antecedent cause and that cause was sin. Furthermore, if Job was an upright man God would intervene in his affairs and reverse the circumstances (Ch. 8: 6). God will not cast away a perfect man. Nor help evildoers (Ch. 8: 20). This seemed all so logical, so reasonable, so scriptural, but it did not solve Job’s problem; it rather complicated it. God did eventually intervene in the affairs of Job, but in his own good time and perhaps the most difficult thing in the life of a Christian is to wait God’s time. One has written—“I never knew the right to fail. I never knew the wrong prevail. But just as day succeeds the night, so shall each wrong give place to right if I can only wait.” The most important words of these lines are the last five—“If I can only wait.” Job had to wait a long time but he was eventually vindicated. His hope of vindication seems to have gone beyond time. Suppose he had never been vindicated on earth his faith seems to

stretch to a life beyond the grave where all wrongs will be righted. One has well said that if there was no after life, this life would be like a book without the last chapter; the last chapter of our lives has yet to be written. The usual interpretation of Job's words in Chapter 19: 25 is not too clear. The revisers seemed to have difficulty with the word "Redeemer" and finished up by putting the word "vindicator" in their margin. Also instead of the words, "In my flesh I shall see God" they rather suggest the meaning to be "without my flesh"—that is when his earthly body had gone to dust he would still live unto God. Whether he knew the truth of resurrection or not he did know and believe in life beyond the grave. It all seems so clear to us in the declaration of the New Testament, but Job could not turn to the gospels and epistles for instruction.

Zophar, the last of the three, began to speak and had not gone far when he made the cruel assertion that Job's sufferings were in no way commensurate with his sins. He was not suffering as much as he should.

"Therefore know thou that God exacteth of thee less than thy sins deserveth" (Ch. 11: 6). Not a very comforting thought and most inappropriate at the time. Little wonder Job's answers were a bit severe at times. How would we have reacted in the circumstances? And how did Zophar's assertion compare with God's estimation of his servant Job in Chapter 1? Truly fools rush in where angels dare to tread. Then Zophar sought to impress Job with the greatness of God. "Canst thou by searching find out God? Can thou find out the Almighty to perfection? (Ch. 11: 7).

One thinks of the words of Paul, many years after, in Romans 11: 33: "Oh the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable are his judgments and his ways past finding out?" Even in the light of New Testament revelation we still have our limitations as to the knowledge of God. If Zophar had sat down and discussed these things in a friendly way, how helpful it could have been, but the implication was that Job did not know about

God while the opposite was the truth. No one in that day had a greater exercise about divine things than Job. We repeat he had not the revelation we have today, but taking creation as his text-book he knew something of God and desired to know more. Zophar could not enlighten Job; it was a question of the lesser teaching the greater. Job was aware of the great moral distance between God and man and expresses himself thus: "Oh that I might know where I could find him. I would come even to his seat" (Ch. 23: 3). Conscious of his own inability to approach God he longed for a daysman to come between them, one who could touch Deity and humanity and bring the two together (Ch. 9: 33). Surely this had its answer in the incarnation of God's son. Emmanuel. God with us. God is seen in creation, also in revelation, his word, but the greatest manifestation of God is in incarnation and today we see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4: 6).

When the three had had their say without helping Job much another man comes into view. Elihu by name, he had been listening to the discussions and was far from satisfied with what he had heard. He seemed to have a greater knowledge of God than the first three, yet he fell into the same error as them in accusing Job. No doubt Job had said many things under pressure that would have been better left unsaid. There was only one who trod this scene who never needed to retrace a step or retract a word.

Even Elihu put a wrong construction on some of the things that Job said. How careful we should be when recounting what someone says that we do not withhold or add that little bit that makes all the difference. We can never ignore God's estimation of his servant. Job could not admit guilt simply to please his accusers. When the Lord was here in the days of his flesh, his followers sometimes misunderstood his words. That may have been excusable, but some put a false interpretation on what he said. That was malicious. John 21: 23 is an example of the former, Mark 14: 58 an example of the latter. Elihu's contention with Job was that he maintained his innocence and questioned the reason of his suffering. Elihu

said right concerning God. "He giveth not account of any of his matters" (Ch. 33:13). Faith trusts God when we cannot understand his ways, and Job went along that line further than many.

Elihu quotes Job as having said, "It profiteth a man nothing that he should delight himself in God" (Ch. 34: 9). Did Job actually say that; if he said words that might have suggested this, what did he mean? The doctrine of the first three was—"God blesses the righteous, and curses the wicked." But Job had seen it otherwise. He had seen calamity when the righteous and the wicked suffered together (Ch. 9: 22). And that is true until this day. We read of a mine disaster, a shipwreck, a plane crash, as we scan the names of dead and injured, the believer's name is there too. This is what Job meant. He was not the only one in scripture to note the prosperity of the wicked as for instance Asaph in Psalm 73. But Job would not have changed places with them; he had the root of the matter in him. This in no way conflicts with the principle that "God is the preserver of all men, specially of them that believe" (I Tim. 4: 10). Even in disaster his people are his special care and if an accident or misfortune overtake them he has some purpose in allowing it. Nothing happens by chance.

Elihu's lengthy discourse at last comes to an end and God himself speaks. Job feels his own insignificance in the presence of God and no longer seeks to defend himself. "Behold I am vile, what shall I answer thee. I will lay my hand upon my mouth" says Job (Ch. 40: 4). He might contend with men but in the presence of God it was different. And yet it is well to remember that the word "vile" does not mean here moral depravity but rather his official rank. It is not the confession of a sinner, though the gospel preacher often uses that way, and in application this may be justified, but the admission of a saint when faced with the majesty of God. The revisers doubtless give the sense when they say, "Behold I am of no account." Likewise in Chapter 42: 6, where the reading is "I abhor myself" may be rendered "I abhor my words and repent in dust and ashes." He admits that he had

uttered things he understood not, things too wonderful for me that I knew not, Chapter 42: 3. How careful we ought to be in what we say especially in divine matters for the Lord hearkens and hears.

What lessons briefly can we learn from this book.

We learn to say as Job said to God, "I know thou canst do everything (Ch. 42: 2). All powerful, all wise, ever present. We learn our own nothingness. "I am of no account." We learn to be careful in our judgment of things; to emulate the spirit of one greater than Job who said, "As I hear I judge, and my judgment is just." We learn to hold the balance of truth; never to press one side at the expense of the other.

Discipline may be the result of sin committed as in David's case. He lay under God's chastening rod. Or again in 1 Cor. 11. Because of sin some were weak and sickly among them and some slept. Discipline may be punitive or on the other hand it may be formative, bringing us into line with the divine will. We learn the need for sympathy. "To him that is afflicted pity should be showed," says Job (Ch. 6: 14). The word pity is actually kindness; what a difference a kind word would have meant to Job in his affliction, but no such word was uttered. "Kind hearts are more than coronets."

The Lord Jesus was kindness personified, for the kindness and love of God our saviour appeared among men in incarnation (Titus 3: 4). "Be ye kind one towards another," says Paul (Eph. 4: 32).

We learn never to underrate the power of Satan. He afflicted Job; he tempted the Lord Jesus in the days of his flesh; he sifted Peter; he goeth about as a roaring lion, yet can be transformed into an angel of light. Paul could say, "We are not ignorant of his devices," but can we all say the same?

Though far separated from Job by time and circumstance, Paul too had his thorn in the flesh and while we may not be able to define it, we do know that it was "the messenger of Satan" to buffet him. We also know its function—"lest he

should be exalted above measure." Paul's desire for its removal was not granted, but he was assured of God's corresponding grace, and the desired effect was achieved "that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (II Cor. 12: 9).

Job's finest moment was not seen in his lengthy replies to his critics but in his praying for them. It was then that the Lord turned the captivity of Job (Ch. 42: 10). The book ends with the reversal of all that had gone before. God blessed the latter end of Job more than the beginning; thus we learn to take a future view of things for "the best is yet to be."

Satan's assessment of God's servant was proved to be wrong. Job said things which might have been better left unsaid; and he himself admits this, "but he never cursed God to his face" as Satan suggested he would.

Job and his friends were reconciled and peace and prosperity pervaded the scene.

So shall it be in the end of time, in a far greater sense. The ultimate fruits of the death of Christ will be seen when Satan's power is forever suppressed and Christ shall reign supreme. In a word Paul said the God of peace shall bruise Satan shortly under your feet (Rom. 16: 20).

