

Job, Man Who Comes Forth As Gold

The name 'Job' is a very old one. It has been found in ancient Egyptian writings dating as far back as 2000 B.C., the time of Abraham! The name 'Job' has been interpreted by scholars to mean, "Where is (my) Father?" The meaning of his name, therefore, seems so appropriate to his situation. Job, an upright man, was allowed to suffer with divine consent, but for no reason that was apparent to him. He could see no cause and effect relationship between his life and his sufferings.

The story of Job is that of a righteous man whose world suddenly and inexplicably caved in. To the best of his knowledge, his life had been one of benevolence, uprightness, and integrity lived in the fear of God. Then, disaster, disease, and dissension tore his world apart.

Job did not know that his life had become a stage upon which God and Satan wrestled for mastery and that he would emerge from the trial as a man tried as gold. He could see no reason for his sufferings, and in the midst of his torment, he cries out, "where is my Father in all of this? Why is He doing this to me? Why isn't God acting and behaving the way I expect Him to behave?" We have all said similar words.

As the book opens, we are introduced to an idyllic scene in which Job, a wealthy Oriental sheik who is honorable, upright, God-fearing, and highly respected, is enjoying the fruits of his labors. He is unaware of councils that have been convened in the courts of heaven above. The angels of God come to present themselves before the Lord. Satan comes as a self-appointed delegate and cynically challenges both Job and God. Job's goodness and motives are called into question by Satan, who thinks he can see into the heart and mind of the man. Satan sees only darkly, however, for he cannot read the human mind the way God can. He does not truly know Job. His accusations against Job will be proven wrong. He is no prophet! He is only an accuser bent on destroying one whom God calls blameless.

The contest begins! A dark shadow falls over the scene. Satan is allowed to begin a systematic attack on Job. In dramatic succession Job's possessions are rustled, his children are killed, and finally Job himself is afflicted with disease! Now let us be sure about the thrust of Satan's strategy. It is indicated in verse 11. It was not to lure Job into specific acts of sin, immorality, dishonesty, or violence, but to tempt him into committing the ultimate sin - disloyalty to God! He wanted to sever the relationship between this upright man and God.

As we consider Job's reaction, and the reaction of his counselors, we need to understand that at that time it was believed that suffering was the result of man's disobedience. Suffering was seen as a kind of divine club with which God punished wickedness and evil in His dealings with nations and individuals. God was understood to be righteous and all-powerful, a God who is just and who judges. His grace, mercy, patience and kindness, however, were not nearly as well understood. Neither were His ways of testing and refining human beings. We will see this as Job's conversations with his counselors unfold.

Job's first reaction is in keeping with his integrity, holiness, and devotion to God. He is staggered by Satan's blows, but he refuses to blame God. Even when his wife incites him to curse God, Job replies, "***Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?***" Job is sinless in his response to his suffering.

After some days had passed, however, Job begins to feel the full weight of his troubles. He vents his feelings of frustration with human limitations. He laments the fact that life is given to men, but understanding is denied (3:23). We are kept in the dark concerning human misery. He laments the day of his birth, crying out “*Why did I not perish at birth, and die as I came from the womb* (3:11)?” His reaction is understandable. Who has not expressed the same feelings of suffering without reason, without justification, of being abandoned by God, of even being attacked and persecuted by the Almighty?

It is as if God has become his enemy. In Job 6:4, Job cries out, “*The arrows of the Almighty are in me, my spirit drinks in their poison; God’s terrors are marshaled against me.*” Then in v. 24 he challenges his comforters in the presence of God to “*Show me where I have been wrong.*” It seems as if God is actually unjust in His dealings with Job and with men. Considering his own uprightness, it seems to Job that God is treating him no different than He treats the wicked.

In Job 9:22 he charges, “*It is all the same ... He destroys both the blameless and the wicked.*” It seems to Job that if this is the way God is going to deal with him, it would be better if God simply looked away and left him alone. In Job 10:20 he cries: “*Are not my few days almost over? Turn away from me so I can have a moment's joy.*”

Finally, it seems to Job that God has done just that. He cannot find God in all of this. It is as his own name implies, “Where is my Father?” So in Job 23:3-5 Job finally challenges God to emerge and stand trial:

“If only I knew where to find him; if only I could go to his dwelling! I would state my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments. I would find out what he would answer me, and consider what he would say.”

Now I want us to probe more fully into what is at the heart of Job’s condition. I also want us to understand his three counselors, Eliphaz, Zophar, and Bildad. For this, we will need to survey a number of verses that are like keys unlocking the door to our understanding of the dynamics between these men.

In the case of Job, the problem was not with any specific acts of sin. Did not God say at the outset that Job was blameless and upright, a man who feared God and shunned evil (1:8)? Yes! In fact, the Lord declared that there was no one on earth like Job! So, Job’s suffering had not arisen out of any misdemeanors on his part. Quite to the contrary, his conduct had been exemplary.

There was, however, something amiss at the core of Job’s heart and life. In 27:5-6, Job says this to his three counselors:

“I will never admit you are in the right; till I die, I will not deny my integrity. I will maintain my righteousness and never let go of it; my conscience will not reproach me as long as I live.”

In 29:14, he further states that, “*I put on righteousness as my clothing; justice was my robe and my turban.*” Then, in 31:35-40, he makes his final plea and rests his case:

“I sign now my defense – let the Almighty answer me; let my accuser put his indictment in writing ... I would give him an account of my every step; like a prince I would approach him ... The words of Job are ended.”

With these words, we come to the heart of Job's dilemma. He has not yet seen God! He thinks God is his accuser when it is really Satan. God is his Redeemer and Purifier!

But there is more to be uncovered. Job sees his righteousness as *his own*. He will not allow his conscience to reproach him as long as he lives. "I put on righteousness as **my** clothing!" Where is the righteousness of God with which we are to be clothed? He has not yet seen what the great prophet Isaiah will see; namely that, "**All our righteousness acts are like filthy rags**" (Isa. 64:6). This, of course, is in comparison with the righteousness of God. Isaiah had a vision of God in His majestic holiness and surpassing righteousness, and he realized just how far short of God's glory he had come. Job has yet to see God!

What about our friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar? They say some things about God that are true enough and theologically correct. Perhaps the most glowing example of this is found in 22:21-28, where Eliphaz provides one of the most eloquent descriptions of repentance:

"Submit to God and be at peace with him ... Accept instruction from his mouth and lay up his words in your heart. If you return to the Almighty, you will be restored: If you remove wickedness far from your tent and assign your nuggets to the dust, your gold of Ophir to the rocks in the ravines, then the Almighty will be your gold, the choicest silver for you ..."

This is very beautiful and true to the mark, but it is delivered in the wrong context, in the context of judgment and condemnation. The conversations between Job and his three counselors are a sad case study into the "dialogues of the deaf." From chapter four through to the end of chapter thirty-one, what we see is intellectual jousting and self-righteous condemnation. Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar come alongside Job in judgment and condemnation. They swiftly conclude that if Job is suffering, he must have brought it upon himself by committing sin. Their reasoning is so simple: if Job were not guilty, none of this would be happening to him. Perhaps nowhere is this more clearly articulated than in 22:5, where Eliphaz flatly states that Job's wickedness is great and his sins are endless. This is not what God Himself had said about Job.

Back and forth it goes in endless cycles of accusation and denial. In the eyes of his three counselors, Job is sinful and deserving of his fate. In Job's eyes, they are ruthless windbags who, far from empathizing with him, weeping with him, and comforting him, only attack and mock him. Their dialogues end at 32:1, where we read, "**So these three men stopped answering Job, because he was righteous in his own eyes.**" Thank God that the book does not end there!

Enter Elihu! I love what this young man does for Job. He comes not in judgment, but in compassion, not to condemn but to comfort. In 33:6-7, he reassures Job with these words: "**I am just like you before God; I too have been taken from clay. No fear of me should alarm you, nor should my hand be heavy upon you.**"

Then, in verse 32, he adds, "**If you have anything to say, answer me; speak up, for I want you to be cleared.**" Well, this compassionate approach just sets the stage for heavenly windows of divine light and grace to be opened unto Job.

In chapters 34-37 Elihu does what the other three friends should have done. He **stands in the gap** for Job. Instead of hammering Job down into the ground, this young friend lifts Job to the heavens. He does not condemn Job, but neither does he let Job off the hook. In his pain, Job has said some things about God that are not true. While Job's painful ordeal has not been caused by any particular sins, he has allowed his ordeal to lead him into the sin of slandering the Lord.

Elihu sees this! So he points Job to God. He unfolds to Job's pained and darkened mind a picture of the Lord in His majesty, in His beauty, in His unparalleled righteousness, and in His unsurpassed goodness. O Job, do not regard the Lord as your accuser or as your adversary:

“He is wooing you from the jaws of distress to a spacious place free from restriction, to the comfort of your table laden with choice food” (36:16).

What follows from the lips of Elihu is an almost spell-binding recitation of God's mighty power, His unfathomable works, and His amazing grace in caring for all of creation, not the least of which is the creature Man.

Job is enthralled! His mind has been turned. It is now focused on God – not self! Elihu has lifted Job up to the windows of heaven, and beginning in chapter thirty-eight, those windows are thrown open. When the Lord speaks, He builds on the picture that Elihu has already begun to paint. He asks Job a series of questions that lifts the man out of his tormented circumstances and draws him to within sight of the Lord God Almighty in His majestic holiness and glory.

At last Job can hear! Elihu has stood in the gap for Job. I doubt very much that Job could have made the transition from his *futile* conversations with Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, to his *fertile* conversation with God if Elihu had not stood in the gap and prepared Job to hear the word of the Lord.

This is what we must do for each other. We must stand in the gap for each other. We must come alongside one another, not as judges to condemn, or as adversaries to devour, but as fellow travelers who desire to help each other hear God and see God. All who truly see God forsake their self-righteousness and they repent. Our story ends with Job uttering these words:

“Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know ... My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes” (42:3b, 5-6).

May I say a personal word in conclusion? I, too, repent. The Lord has shown me that when He placed me here four years ago, I came alongside as Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. That was my name: Eliphaz Bildad Zophar Franco! Like these three unprofitable counselors, I came with preconceived notions; notions about the institutional Church here in North America (many of which are correct), but more than that, notions about this congregation. I deeply apologize for my manner of coming among you. I should have been Elihu! The Lord has reminded me that it is not enough to speak words that are theologically correct. They must be said in the context of love and compassion. They must be said by one who is willing to stand in the gap and lift others to new heights where they can see God. When that happens, we will all repent of whatever sins have made us come short of the glory of God.

My prayer is that henceforth we will all stand in the gap for one another; that we will not bite and devour and judge one another, but instead that we will nurture, heal, and build up one another. I pray that God's Spirit will breathe on us and make us one in heart, one in love, and one in holiness.