

Job The Problem of Suffering

Introduction

In the previous article I looked at the understanding of suffering held by Job's first two comforters Eliphaz and Bildad. Eliphaz was the gentle mystic who saw life in terms of heavenly principles. For him the world was not spiritual enough, not enough like heaven, and so the inevitable result was that human beings suffer. Eliphaz begins with an understanding of God's character and imposes it upon Job's suffering. "*Human beings are born to trouble/ just as the sparks fly upward*" (**Job 5:7**) The major problem with Eliphaz was that he was so heavenly minded that his maxims about life bore no resemblance to reality.

"Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed?" (**Job 4:7**. NIV)

I also examined the approach of Job's second comforter Bildad. Bildad the firm traditionalist, who interpreted reality in such an earthly and concrete way, as part of his cause and effect approach, that his words seem to tie God's hands. He begins with Job's suffering and draws his conclusions. For Bildad there is an immutable law that God will not reject the upright and that we are punished for forgetting God. Job must therefore be evil and godless. That Job should question God's actions is blasphemy to Bildad. What Eliphaz and Bildad had in common was a retributive view of suffering. In other words God sends suffering as a form of punishment for our rebellion.

We may be inclined to cast Job's friends into an entirely negative light. After all, didn't Job characterize them as "*forgers of lies ... worthless physicians*" (**Job 13:4**)?

But we must remember that Job had some pretty strong things to say about God as well. Not understanding what was happening in his life, he accused God of being a tormentor who terrorised him night and day (**6:4; 9:21-24,34**).

The arrows of the Almighty are in me, my spirit drinks in their poison; God's terrors are marshalled against me. **Job 6:4**

"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.' When a scourge brings sudden death, he mocks the despair of the innocent. When a land falls into the hands of the wicked, he blindfolds its judges. If it is not he, then who is it?" **Job 9:21-24**

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. Then I would speak up without fear of him, but as it now stands with me, I cannot.

Job 9:33 – 35

Later, Job repented of these rash charges against God.

In the New Testament, James reminds us of the "patience of Job" (5:11); but one of the more remarkable things about this book is its portrait of the *patience of God!* The fact of the matter is, Job's friends basically were good men. They believed deeply in God. They extolled his wonders in creation and his benevolence in the affairs of humankind. They acknowledged the moral purity of the Creator and the justness of his dealings with humanity.

Their problem was one of **application**; they applied their cause-and-effect argument (suffering is caused by personal sin) to Job. They had no clue as to what God was doing in Job's life – that his suffering was allowed as a tribute to his faith. Nevertheless, they were

willing to generalize, and accuse Job of dark and secret sins in order to keep their image of God intact.

They “hounded” Job relentlessly; if he would just “repent” of his terrible sin, God would remove his hardships, and all would be well again. Aside from that blunder, they occasionally made some remarkably insightful statements.

Zophar the Dogmatist.

Zophar is a straight talker. He believed in speaking the truth no matter what the cost. With Zophar, however, nearly all ambiguity and mystery is taken away. He will not only speak for God, but he will bring Job into the "deep things" of God.

Zophar describes what Job has said in his previous speeches as a "multitude of words (v.2)" or "babbling" and "wordiness (JV)." How could anyone hear the brilliantly constructed and anguished words of Job in that way? Simple, Zophar was not listening, he was waiting to speak.

He is the first of the friends actually to quote Job (11:4). But his quotation is not what Job said (see 9:20-21).

You say to God, *'My beliefs are flawless and I am pure in your sight.'* (11:4)

What Job actually said was;

"Even if I were innocent, my mouth would condemn me; if I were blameless, it would pronounce me guilty.

Although I am blameless, I have no concern for myself; I despise my own life."

Job 9:20-21

The word translated “teaching” (*leqach* לִקַּח) is probably best rendered "doctrine". This suggests how Zophar "hears" Job's words? In 11:5, Zophar's "wish" that God would speak to Job, is really a thinly-veiled reference to the fact that Zophar thinks *he* will now speak for God.

Do you have friends like this? Are you like this yourself? Is this what you look for in a friend when you are suffering? The basic message of each is the same: a call for Job to repent of the sin that must have caused his suffering.

Eliphaz – Job 5:8; 15:12 – 16; 22:21 – 30.

Bildad – Job 8:3-7.

Zophar – Job 11:13 – 15

Lee Strobel, in his book *“The Case for Faith”* says this;

“This [suffering] is not just an intellectual issue to be debated in sterile academic arenas; its an intensely personal matter that can tie our emotions into knots and leave us with spiritual vertigo – disoriented, frightened and angry.”

That is not to say there are no theological and logical explanations for suffering. Peter Kreeft the Catholic academic and philosopher has written an excellent book called *“Making sense out of suffering.”* But theological argument will not address the emotional and spiritual devastation we feel in the midst of the crisis.

Elihu the brave

Elihu has three disadvantages against him as he speaks.

First, he is a young man in a tradition that honoured elders (32:6). **Second, he is angry.** Four times in the narrative portion of chapter 32 (1-5) his anger is recounted. Anger is the enemy of reasoned and deliberate exposition of wisdom.

Third, he is wordy. We might have received the impression that Job and the friends never stop speaking, but Elihu is even worse than they are. It takes him a full 25 verses to "warm up;" he does not address Job's situation specifically until 33:8. As he himself confesses, "For I am full of words (32:18)." The unwary reader is prepared to set him/herself up for a long and boring sojourn with this young man.

First, it is very precise. He actually quotes words that Job has said. Granted, his first words attributed to Job, "You say, 'I am clean, without transgression (33:9),' " may be a liberal reading of Job's words in 16:17, 9:15 or 10:15, but it is not a direct quotation of Job. But when he attributes the following to Job: "he counts me as his enemy (v.10)," he is quoting Job's words at 13:24 and 19:11, and **when he says, "he puts my feet in stocks and watches all my paths (v.11), that is a direct quotation of 13:27, "You put my feet in the stocks, and watch all my paths."**

Second, he is different from the other friends in the precision of his quotation. They may at times *allude* to Job's attitude or words; never do they quote him directly.

Third, Elihu was really the first person who actually *listened* to Job. Rather than identical quotations being "boring," they are indicative of a most profound psychological truth--we become willing to modify our construal of events precisely when others show that they are listening to us.

Elihu is better than the other friends about this. (We read about him in Job chapters 32-37.) He suggests a *spiritual value in suffering.

It is the value of continuing when things are hard. Elihu has a belief about God. He thinks that God's actions with human beings can be a mystery. He also has a belief about the way that God deals with humans. God's methods match his character (**33:29-30**). God always deals with his children in a fair way (**34:16-20**). We only know about a very small part of what happens. God knows everything (**34:21-28**).

Job's fault, for Elihu does not seem to reside in the moral realm (i.e., he has not done something wicked to deserve the punishment) but more in the realm of thought--

"For he has said, 'It profits one nothing to take delight in God (34:9).'"

"Job speaks without knowledge, his words are without insight (34:35)."

Though Job is guilty of "rebellion," however (v. 37), that is the biggest fault that Elihu will lay at his doorstep. Elihu has subtly redefined the nature of Job's malady and the expectations Job should have from God. It is a masterful effort.

The Purpose of Pain

Elihu is firmly in the camp of those who see the educative and soul-building character of suffering. While God does not keep the wicked alive, he "gives the afflicted their right (36:6)."

While the afflicted are in their chains, God declares their transgression to them, opens their ears to instruction (**36:10**) and commands them to turn back from their iniquity (**36:10**).

Then comes the crucial thought:

"He (God) delivers the afflicted by their affliction, and opens their ear by adversity (**36:15**)."

The thought is worth pausing over. **The Hebrew text has it that afflicted people are delivered by means of ("buh" Hebrew word) their affliction.** "Buh" is a preposition attached to a noun, and can be translated either as "in" or "by means of." However we render it, Elihu believes that God is there speaking through the process of affliction. Then in 36:16-17, Elihu applies this insight to Job's life: God also has allured (or "is alluring") you from your own distress to a broader and wider field of life, in which your table will be full of fatness (36:16-17).

In short, and using language from the 21st century, Elihu makes the claim that Job's distress is the means for God to lead Job to freedom.

C.S. Lewis wrote: *God whispers in our pleasures but shouts in our pain; it is His megaphone to arouse a deaf world, (The Problem of Pain).*

Elihu's ability to plunge an interpretive wedge between Job's pain and Job's interpretation of his pain may be the key to Job's change of heart.

But Elihu does not just place an interpretive film or filter over Job's distress. He also prepares the way for God's coming into the situation. Job wanted to talk to God directly ever since Job 9; now, Elihu says, God is coming for a visit.

"At this also my heart trembles, and leaps out of its place. Listen, listen to the thunder of his voice and the rumbling that comes from his mouth (37:1-2)." God's thunderous voice shows that God does "great things that we cannot comprehend (37:5)."

Elihu is so close to the mark that he is able even to predict the kind of questions God will ask Job.

EVERY TEAR, HIS TEAR

In his interview with Peter Kreeft Lee Stroble commented,

"The answer, then, to suffering is not an answer at all."

"Correct," Peter emphasized, leaning forward as he pleaded his case.

"It's the Answerer. It's Jesus himself. It's not a bunch of words, it's *the* Word. It's not a tightly woven philosophical argument; it's a person. *The* person.

The answer to suffering cannot just be an abstract idea, because this isn't an abstract issue; it's a personal issue. It requires a personal response. The answer must be someone, not just something, because the issue involves someone—*God, where are you?*"

To Kreeft, there is one—a very real one. A living One.

"Jesus is there, sitting beside us in the lowest places of our lives," he said. "Are we broken? He was broken, like bread, for us.

Are we despised? He was despised and rejected of men.

Do we cry out that we can't take any more? He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. Do people betray us? He was sold out himself. Are our tenderest relationships broken? He too loved and was rejected.

Do people turn from us? They hid their faces from him as from a leper.

"Does he descend into all of our hells? *Yes, he does.*

From the depths of a Nazi death camp, Corrie ten Boom wrote: '*No matter how deep our darkness, he is deeper still.*'

He not only rose from the dead, he changed the meaning of death and therefore of all the little deaths—the sufferings that anticipate death and make up parts of it.

"He is gassed in Auschwitz. He is sneered at in Soweto. He is mocked in Northern Ireland. He is enslaved in the Sudan. He's the one we love to hate, yet to us he has chosen to return love.

"In the end, God has only given us partial explanations," he said slowly, a shrug in his voice. "Maybe that's because he saw that a better explanation wouldn't have been good for us. I don't know why. As a philosopher, I'm obviously curious. Humanly, I wish he had given us more information."

With that, he looked fully into my face.

"But he knew Jesus was more than an explanation," he said firmly. "He's what we really need. If your friend is sick and dying, the most important thing he wants is not an explanation; he wants you to sit with him. He's terrified of being alone more than anything else. So God has not left us alone."

"And for that," he said, "*I love him.*"