

The Problem of Pain: Why do Good People Suffer?

Job is the first of the Poetical/Wisdom Books in the Old Testament. Among these books, it is unique as an entire drama of one man's struggle with the question of suffering. Job is best understood as a whole Book, rather than a collection of individual sayings like Psalms or Proverbs.

Unless you read Job as a whole, you will not realize that the good-sounding counsel Job receives from his friends is actually bad (or, at least, incomplete) advice. The plot of the story is very simple: Job, who was probably a Gentile believer, living northeast of Canaan, had been blessed by God with great wealth and a large family.

Satan ("hateful opponent") asks for an opportunity to afflict Job, so that God will see that Job only worships God because of the blessings he has received from God. God allows the testing, but puts limits on how far Satan can trouble Job. Job's sorrow at the loss of his wealth, his children and his health is so devastating that he can barely hold on to life.

Four of his friends visit him in his affliction, and they attempt to comfort him by offering explanations for why all this trouble has happened in Job's life. Job, of course, is in the midst of his own attempts to come to grips with his deep affliction.

Why is Job suffering? Why do bad things happen to godly people? Why does God allow Job to be stripped and devastated? Where is God in all this? Why doesn't He do something? What has Job done to deserve this?

The Counselors

Eliaphaz	God is punishing you because you have sinned somewhere, somehow (4: 7-9). God is teaching you a lesson in order to get you to stop sinning (4: 17-18).
Bildad	If you are innocent, then God would rescue you and restore your condition (8: 4-7). Your troubles are due to your sin.
Zophar	God sees your hidden sins. Confess them and consider yourself blessed not to be punished more for your sins (11: 11).
Elihu	Don't expect God to answer on your terms. Humbly endure the suffering that God is using to correct your wrong attitudes and pride (33: 13-17).
All	Suffering is a result of your own sin or of your refusal to submit to God. God's favor or disfavor can be seen in your life's circumstances.

The Truth

1. The struggle of faith--seeing God as our Advocate or as our Adversary--will often be private and personal. Family and friends can offer counsel, but there will be times when we must resolve ourselves to God alone.
2. There are situations in life that no one--not us, our family, or friends--can understand except God. If we demand explanations or insist on understanding why, we will come up short and be led to erroneous conclusions.
3. God is sovereign. Natural reasonings cannot always grasp the complexities of what is going on. Our hope must be in His greatness and goodness, not in explanations of or solutions to our suffering.
4. There are mysteries to the most basic physical happenings in nature. All we see is with our natural eye; we do not fathom what is going on "behind the scenes" in such simple occurrences as the birth of mountain goats or the soaring of an eagle. How much less do we know of the ways of God.
5. God wants to move us away from trusting in our own reasonings and our own righteousness.
 - a. Human reasonings and conclusions are usually inadequate. Insisting on their veracity is a form of pride.
 - b. The greatest trauma we suffer is not usually the circumstance, but the questions of, "Why did this happen?" or "Why did God allow this?"
 - c. Self-righteousness--focusing on the fact that we have done nothing wrong--will not get us where we really want to be: at peace in God's perfect plan.
 - d. Our own rightness is a vain hope anyway. It will never be enough to stand on in the court of Heaven.
6. God's care and sovereignty extend over both good and bad times. Our own efforts and reasonings are of little value in getting us into blessing or out of adversity.
7. By relying on God alone to preserve us/defend us against what other people may say and think about why we are suffering, we can remain open to whatever shaping God may be doing in our life through whatever unprovoked or undeserved affliction that comes to us.