

Catharsis and Its Reward The Story of Job

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Focus of the Book of Job

The story of Job, as presented in the Book of Job in the Bible, presents the human dilemma in several aspects. When a righteous human is inflicted with suffering beyond measure, who does he or she blame? Is blaming another person or God for the affliction justified? Should he or she look inward and patiently suffer for no fault of his or her? Is there no limit to human endurance and probity? In the Book of Job, God's power, wisdom and sovereignty in the world are presented from the Judeo-Christian perspective. It teaches how the righteous should endure suffering; how man should comfort the suffering, accept the fact that man can never fully comprehend God's ways in his life and/or in the world.

The Book of Job deals with a wealthy and righteous nobleman named Job. He has a large family, extensive flocks and many servants. He is a blameless and upright man always, careful not to do evil. The scene is shifted to Heaven where God praises Job for his righteous character. Satan challenges God to let him afflict Job to see whether his devotion to God is genuine or not and whether his devotion will last through his suffering. God accepts the challenge with a condition that Job's life should not be touched in the process. Thus Job loses his wealth and his ten children overnight and finally Job is affected with loathsome sores from the top of his head to the bottom of his feet.

Job's four friends Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar and Elihu visit to comfort him. On the seventh day, Job begins his conversation, in which each one shares his thoughts. Eliphaz believes that his sufferings are due to Job's sins and he urges Job to seek God's favor. Bildad and Zophar also agree that Job must have committed evil. Zophar states that for all the evil done by Job he deserves even greater punishments. Job tries to defend himself and laments for his suffering. To make the situation worse, Elihu remarks that God is trying to teach Job something if he would

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only stop defending himself. Commenting on Job, Brown states (1), “He is misunderstood, unanswered, and--as his friends' frustration grows--even abused”. Finally God interrupts through the whirlwind and claims his power over all evil as supreme God. Job confesses his unworthiness, lack of understanding and weakness. Job also does a noble thing. He asks the Lord to forgive his friends for all the things they said about him, and God is pleased with him. He restores Job’s health, gives him twice the material possessions he had earlier enjoyed and blesses him with children. The book ends describing Job’s happy in his old age.

Job’s Trial

The major problem Job faces during his trial is that he is not able to glorify God in his sufferings. His sufferings and the critical comments hurled at him by his wife and friends, forbid him from praising God. His lamentation is so intense that he is unconsciously deprived of the power of adoration. He loses the good opinion he earns through his deeds. He is titled ‘righteous’ by the people of his country when he is in prosperity. But later, when he loses everything and is walking through terrible suffering, he becomes a byword and a laughing stock for the people. They make a proverb of him like ‘As poor as Job’. This is in tune with the current scenario. This is a true indication of the fickle mind of human beings. Men praise others endowed with wealth and power. But the moment they lose everything, they are no more recognized by the world; no one seems to care whether the poor lives or dies.

Mystery of Suffering

The book speaks about the mystery of suffering. It also answers the question why the godly suffer? According to Charkravarthi (2), the book of Job is regarded by many critics of eminence as:

a moral and religious apologue, designed to show that God’s government of the world is inexplicable, on the theory that men’s temporal blessings and afflictions are proportioned to their goodness and wickedness respectively. It enforces the duty of obedience and submission to the will of God. (19)

Job also raises the unanswered question ‘why does God allow the righteous to suffer?’ In a deeper sense, the book teaches how the righteous should handle suffering with patience, endure without cursing God. Wayne Jackson states that,

The book defends the absolute glory and perfection of God- It sets forth the theme echoed in Ps18:3 (“I will call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised”). God deserves our praise simply on the basis of who He is, apart from the blessings He bestows... The question of suffering is addressed- Why do we suffer? Who or what causes it? Why doesn’t God do something? Not all questions are answered, but some important points are made. Man is unable to subject the painful experiences of human existence to a meaningful analysis. God’s workings are beyond man’s ability to fathom. Man simply cannot tie all the “loose ends” of the Lord’s purposes together. We must learn to trust in God, no matter the circumstances. (Mark)

Sustaining Positive Attitude

The positive attitude of Job sustains his moral strength and keeps him unruffled. Distressing situations crops up to subdue his faith through various agents like his wife and friends. His mind sways between the discouraging criticisms of his companions and a firm faith in his Maker. With such negative forces around him, his steadfast faith keeps him going. He continues to believe that God will deliver him. Testing and suffering become inevitable to prove his worth, and needless to say that it is his perseverance and faith that keep him strong through his travail. In the views of Wayne Jackson (Mark 4),

Suffering is not always the result of personal sin. The erroneous conclusion drawn by Job’s friends is that suffering is always a consequence of sin. Job proves this is not the case. Suffering is allowed as a compliment to one’s spirituality. God allowed Job to suffer to prove to satan what kind of man he really was... The book paints a beautiful picture of patience... From the “patience of Job”, we learn that it means to maintain fidelity to God, even under great trials in which one does not understand what is happening (Mark).

“Suffering had become an expansive, faith-demonstrating opportunity for Job.” (Grace Communion 3). The Book of Job is based on the Judeo-Christian belief that the issue and consequence of Job’s sufferings is for a good cause. Though God wounds man, his hands make him whole in due time and supports them by making their life easy under afflictions and opens a way for them to escape. He also comforts them according to the time wherein he is afflicted.

The love and concern of God for man is portrayed in this book. To quote, “For he maketh sore, and bindeth up: he woundeth, and his hands make whole.” (Job 5:18) “In famine he shall redeem thee from death; and in war from the power of the sword.” (Job 5:20) He keepeth back his soul from the pit, And his life from perishing by the sword.” (Job 30: 18) “He delivereth the poor in his affliction, And openeth their ears in oppression.” (Job 36:15). “what troubled Job was that he was in a condition of life which (as he conceived) hindered the main end of his life , which was the glorifying of God” (Mathew, 51).

A Dynamic Portrayal of Innocent Suffering

The sufferings of Job in this story represent all innocent suffering in the world. The problem of innocent suffering, which puzzles Job, puzzles all humankind. In other words, Job’s problem is a widespread problem. The solution to this problem, as implied through God’s oration, is a solution which suggests that no effort should be made to understand this problem because God’s ways are mysterious and inscrutable.

The lament of the suffering Job is indeed the release of his repressed emotions. The ‘I’ of Job’s self expresses the different phases of his experiences, namely, the ‘I’ of prosperity, the ‘I’ of innocence and the ‘I’ of adversity. The self of Job is totally annihilated after his encounter with God when he exclaims “Behold, I am vile; what shall I answer You? I lay my hand over my mouth” (Job 40:4).

Why the Good and Righteous People Suffer?

Behind every single righteous suffering, there is reward as per the story of Job. If everyman feels that his sufferings will be rewarded doubly, the question of why do the righteous suffer, will not arise. But this has not been the attitude we adopt. The unanswered question as to

why the good and the righteous people suffer is a never-ending question raised by scholars, philosophers and, of course, by every individual. Though Job has strong faith in God, he too asks the same question at one point of time when he is suffering, “know then that God has wronged me, and has surrounded me with His net. ... If I cry out concerning wrong, I am not heard. If I cry aloud, there is no justice” (Job 19:6, 7). However, the question remains still unanswered.

People have been contributing innumerable reasons to answer this question. It is certainly surprising to know Job withstands his suffering without cursing God. The answer perhaps lies in the fact that the greatness of mind can be proved by the way one handles the inevitable suffering in every human’s life.

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