

The Problem of Evil and Suffering

By Dr. Larry Waters

“Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?”¹

JOB 2:10

*“Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me.
Yet not what I will, but what you will.”*

MARK 14:36

*Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents,
but that the works of God might be displayed in him.”*

JOHN 9:3

Evil permeates this world; to live is to suffer. Yet God sovereignly and providentially cares for his creation. The Scriptures affirm both the wretchedness of the human condition and the genuine, loving care of him who made all things. Perhaps the most puzzling questions facing humankind are: Why does God allow evil and suffering? How long must his creatures suffer before God sets things right?

Written by an unknown author, possibly the most ancient literary account² in our Bible, the book of Job is a mixture of divine and human wisdom which addresses a major life-issue: why righteous people suffer undeservedly. “Undeserved suffering” does not imply that mankind is not justly under the curse as a result of the fall of man in Genesis 3; rather it refers to suffering which is not traceable to a specific act of personal sin or disobedience. This phrase does not infer that Job is sinless, or that he is without sin during the cycles of debate. Suffering is undeserved in the sense of actually being or appearing to be unfair or unjust. The book of Job is also a prime example of Hebrew wisdom literature that labors with the concept of *theodicy*: a defense of the integrity of the justice and righteousness of God in light of the evil, injustice, and undeserved suffering in the world. If this is so, then the emphasis of the book is not totally on the man Job and his suffering, although he and his suffering are certainly central, but also on God himself and his relationship to his supreme creation.

Job, nonetheless, is a book dealing with human suffering, even though the suffering of the innocent does not encompass the whole of the intent of the author. Although the word “innocent” disturbs some, it is used here in the sense of innocence of any wrongdoing as the base for the suffering Job is enduring throughout the book, not innocence in the sense of having no sin nor culpability as a fallen creation. The book of Job shows that the sufferer can question and doubt, face the hard questions of life with faith, maintain an unbroken relationship with a loving God, and still come to a satisfactory resolution for personal and collective injustice and undeserved suffering.

These observations also need to be addressed not only within the context of a suffering righteous man named Job, but also within the whole believing community who suffer by fraternity with him. This means that all believers are involved and share in similar sufferings and struggles. As Francis Andersen points out in his commentary on Job, “the problem of suffering, human misery, or the larger sum of evil in all its forms is a problem *only* for the person who believes in one God who is all-powerful and all-loving.”³ This is not to say that a non-believer does not struggle with the same questions, rather, if the questions do not lead to a relationship with God, then they are normally used as excuses for rejecting God, or reasons to dismiss divine claims without actually struggling with the biblical issues. The believer, however, struggles with the seeming inconsistencies and incongruities, attempting to harmonize these difficulties with faith in God’s Word. All of the questions that relate to God, man, and Satan—justice and injustice, sovereignty and freedom, innocence and guilt, good and evil, blessing and cursing—are interwoven within the context of undeserved suffering. The book of Job and its presentation of undeserved suffering serve therefore, as a dependable, useful model for the believer of any generation in dealing with these questions.

Satanic Motivation and Method as the Cause of Suffering

While Satan is the *prime mover* behind sin, evil, and suffering, it is also correct to point out that one cannot divorce the connection between Satan’s desire and God’s allowance of that desire to become reality. This friction is clearly demonstrated in the terrible troubles inflicted on Job. Satan is the cause; God’s people feel the effect. However, God is also at work in suffering. In such times, it is well to remember that this does not imply that God is detached and uninvolved in what happens to his people. But, we must admit that God plays in a higher league than we do. His ways are far above our ways. God is greater than we are in intellect, power and knowledge. His ways are usually past our finding out (Job 28:23; Isaiah 55:9). God does inflict suffering directly and indirectly for many different reasons, such as judgment, discipline, refining, and more. Yet since the fall of mankind, it is Satan who is the personal prime mover behind all human misery.

The book of Job opens when Satan, after traveling throughout the earth, comes before the throne of God. Job 1:8 reveals three areas of Satanic attack: Job’s righteousness, Job’s fear of God, and Job’s separation from sin. God, then, issues a challenge to Satan. The devil’s ultimate acceptance of the challenge is based on these elementary issues that begin here and continue throughout the Book. Can Job’s righteousness, reverence of God and separation from sin be compromised? Why does Job live righteously, fear God, and separate himself from sin? The allegation of Satan is that Job fears God only because of God’s gift of protection and prosperity. The *prosperity issue* and its resultant false theology (the prosperity gospel), then, becomes a major focus in understanding suffering throughout the book. The presentation of this false theology and its challenge is found in the recorded statements of Satan before the throne of God (chapters 1–2), Job’s lament (chapter 3), and the three cycles of dialogue involving Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar with Job (chapters 4–31). The monologue of Elihu (chapters 32–37) and the speeches of God (chapters 38–42) present a correction of this theology.

Satan’s accusation is directed toward the foundation of both God’s justice and Job’s righteousness. Satan basically asks the question: Is it love or is it greed and self-serving motives that induce a person to be righteous, fear God and separate from sin? Satan wrongly assumes that since God protects and blesses Job, this becomes the foundation of his righteousness rather than Job’s personal intimate relationship based on love, trust, and true fear of God (1:8–10; 2:3). Satan’s assumption becomes more troublesome when the traditional human wisdom of the three friends is applied to God. Traditional wisdom reasons that since God is in control of the world, and because he is just, the only way wise people can maintain faith in him is to see *all* blessing as evidence of goodness and righteousness and all suffering as evidence of unrighteousness and sin. In his book *Out of the Whirlwind*, L.D. Johnson correctly calls this “pragmatic religion” and an “insidious heresy.”⁴ Belief in God and subsequent service to him would then be reduced to a prosperity/pragmatic religious formula or system of works.

After the first two chapters of Job, Satan is noticeably absent from the story. His person is no longer a factor, but his assumptions, accusations, and theology are still active throughout the dialogue. Interwoven within the fabric of retribution/recompense theology, expressed by the three friends who interact with Job, is Satan's purpose to see God's highest creation curse God. Satan's objective is to turn a righteous man against his just God.

It is interesting that God's charge against Satan, "you have incited me against him to destroy him for no good reason" (2:3b) is a horrifying, yet enlightening look into the character of Satan. Humanity means nothing to him. Mankind means no more to the accuser than a vehicle for cursing God. Therefore, it must be remembered that Job is not suffering from retribution or recompense for what he has done or not done, as Satan suggests, rather it is because Satan hates the personal relationship Job shares with God (1:8). Yet, the three "friends" will support Satan's theology, and rather than comfort Job, will be a source of great discouragement and despair.

Chapters nine and ten contain examples of the potency of the false doctrine of the friends and its influence on Job. It is here that Job made the transition from, "The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD. Through all this Job did not sin nor did he blame God" (1:21–22), to "For he crushes me with a tempest, and multiplies my wounds without cause" (9:17–20).⁵ Job still holds that God is not unapproachable (9:4–12). He is not a monster (9:13–16). But, in his despair, Job accuses God of being unfair and unjust (vv. 17–20), since he observes that God seems to often punish good and reward evil (vv. 21–24). God does not fit the preconceived claims of traditional wisdom, so, as Job becomes despondent over the swiftness of life (vv. 25–26), he expresses that God will never forgive him (vv. 27–31), and pleads for a mediator (vv. 32–33). Giving up on that possibility, Job pleads with God to diminish the suffering so that he can meet God in court and plead his own case (vv. 34–35). Even though Job sees great inconsistencies in the application of the doctrine by the three friends (24:1–12), he concludes that God does not really care for him, and that he is caught in some sort of divine entrapment where God's loving kindness is absent (10:1–13). He laments his birth, and denies that he has a destiny (10:14–22). Job is not only captured by false counsel, but he is now ready for a true counselor.

The Intervention of Elihu

Elihu begins his discourses with a lengthy introduction and expression of anger toward both Job and the three friends (32:1–10). He feels that both parties have been guilty of perverting divine justice and of misrepresenting God generally (32:1–3; 11–22), and he does not appear to join the three friends in attempting to uphold their theological views. It would seem that Elihu, unlike the three friends, is attempting to correct their faulty image of God and how he relates to mankind.

Elihu speaks to Job without receiving a reply. In chapter 33, Elihu establishes that God is not silent during the suffering of Job. In chapter 34, he confirms that God is not unjust. Furthermore, God is neither uncaring (chapter 35), nor is he powerless to act in behalf of his people (chapters 36–37). Chapter 37 introduces God's response and returns the discussion to the issue of God's sovereignty and plan for Job. Elihu, then, brings to Job a totally different perspective: *Your suffering is not because of past sin*, but (1) to keep you from continuing to accept a sinful premise for suffering; (2) to draw you closer to God; (3) to teach you a true wisdom that reveals God as sovereignly in control of the affairs of your life; and (4) to show you that God does reward the righteous, but only on the basis of his love and grace. It is as if Elihu is saying,

"You insist on justice and righteousness, but do you really want to be treated justly? Have you really considered what would happen if God took you at your word?" . . . one cannot have a relationship with God as long as one thinks that there is something in oneself which makes one deserve God's friendship—or for that matter, a genuine relationship with another human being on such terms . . .

God never withdraws from justice, no matter what, no matter how deep the frustration, the bitterness, the darkness, the confusion, the pain.⁶

Elihu identifies himself with Job. He is a fellow sufferer, not an observer (33:6). He helps Job realize that a relationship with God is neither founded nor maintained by his insistence on loyalty, purity, or righteousness, but is wholly of grace. Elihu does not see the primary basis of Job's suffering as sin, although he does not minimize Job's move toward sin in the dialogue. Rather, for Elihu, suffering becomes, among other things, a preventative measure that keeps Job from perpetuation of a sinful, false theology. Suffering, as a teacher, draws Job closer to God and grace, because God's sovereign control and freedom of action over the affairs of Job's life are not held by the restrictions of a theological system of retribution/recompense, but are acts of grace and mercy. God, therefore, rewards the righteous in grace, not because of some human action seeking a deserved response. Job was never the same after his contact with Elihu.

The three counselors were used to intensify the pressure on Job to accept the traditional doctrine of retribution/recompense and to inflict greater mental suffering on Job. As agents of the philosophy of Satan the three friends were very effective in increasing the suffering of an already hurting man. However, even though Job found inconsistencies with the application of the doctrine, he shared the premise with the friends of a world founded on a *quid pro quo*, reward and punishment scheme. This position only added to his frustration. This *quid pro quo* premise was contested by Elihu and shown to be without substance. He prepared Job for God's response to the debates and Job's ultimate submission to his Sovereign. Elihu brought perspective, clarity, empathy, compassion, and concrete help, enabling and preparing Job to have a personal conversation with God.

God Speaks to Job

God speaks out of the storm, or whirlwind. He begins by charging Job with darkening his counsel by "words without knowledge" (as Elihu had twice said, 34:35; 35:16). God will not address Job's suffering directly during this discourse, nor will he answer the attacks on his justice by Job. After attempting to find answers to unanswerable problems, Job and his friends are now forced to return to God and his essence. God speaks of his sovereignty and omnipotence as demonstrated in the creation of the earth, the sea, the sun, the underworld, light and darkness, the weather, and the heavenly bodies (38:4–38). He then asks two questions of Job (4:1–2): "Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him?" and "Will the accuser of God answer him?" Of course, Job and the friends are silent (40:3–5).

The storm motif is found in the second speech (40:6). Chapter 40:8–14 presents the power of God versus the power of man. God addresses, but does not defend or explain his justice. God does say he is and will always be just and fair in the administration of the lives and destinies of his creatures. God alone administers and regulates justice, not Job, not the three friends, and certainly not Satan. The "Ode to the Behemoth" follows, where God's own wisdom poetry stresses the power that is in God's hands in opposition to that of man or Satan (40:14–24). The second poem (41:1–34) is the "Ode to the Leviathan" representing the same essential principles. What the behemoth and the leviathan represent is contested in scholarly circles, but the message is that man has no power over these creatures, therefore, he can only find strength and power in God. God is sovereign, omnipotent, just, loving and perfectly righteous.

God did not call for the repentance of Job on the basis of a promise that all of Job's pain would be explained, that he would be vindicated, or that a restoration to prosperity and a return of all his losses would be assured. What God did was bring Job to a face-to-face meeting with himself. And, what did Job learn from this encounter?

Perhaps the first thing Job discovered was that the consuming passion for vindication suddenly presented itself as ludicrous once the courageous rebel stood in God's presence. By maintaining complete silence

on this singular issue that had brought Job to a confrontation with his Maker, God taught his servant the *error* in assuming that the universe operated according to a principle of rationality.⁷

It was at that point that Job repented of his misconception of God and God's freedom, not of the alleged past sin that was the focus of the three friends (42:7–9). Still, God commended Job, because even in the face of doubt and pressure from false theology, he maintained a personal relationship with him and brought his doubts directly to him. Therefore, Satan's hypothesis (1:9–11; 2:3–4) was proven false. Job finally rejected human approaches, the approaches of tradition, logic, and all wisdom that was foreign to what he learned about God and himself. All attempts to explain God and his actions either logically, historically or traditionally failed. Job was left with God and God alone. Note again that God did not address the prosperity issue. The prosperity of Job was returned only after everyone involved understood that all blessing comes by his grace alone, not by the activity and piety of Job or through acceptance of a false retribution/recompense theology.

Evaluation and Conclusions

Throughout the drama it was established that in the devil's world there is no justice. It is true that justice is found in God's plan, but to assume that the fallen world, under the rule of Satan, is equally fair is untenable. The failure of traditional wisdom to answer Job's complaint reveals that the world operates by the plan of a fallen being, and only by relationship with God can fallen humanity find reason, meaning, and purpose within the injustices of the world. It was the false assumption of Satan, Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and yes, to some extent, Job, that earthly punishment of the wicked and earthly reward of the righteous was a fixed doctrine that limited God's freedom to presupposed actions based on that assumption. A simple example of the fallacy of this assumption was illustrated by God's provision of rain. Rain was often seen as a reward or, if withheld, a punishment for human action. Here, however, the rain is not at all a vehicle of morality, good, or evil (38:25–27). Rain falls by the grace of God on both the righteous and wicked as evidence of the grace of God.

Is it not conceivable that God wanted to show that neither man's superior piety nor his sin affects how God administers his plan? Did he not then—and does he not now—administer that plan by grace? Job's hope had been in the positive results of a false doctrine, while his friends had extolled the negative aspects of that same doctrine. First Elihu (chapters 32–37) and then God (chapters 38–42) stated that these misplaced hopes of a *fixed* recompense for one's action have no place in the Divine economy. In fact, in his final reply (40:3–5; 42:2–3, 5–6), Job acknowledges this fact. This is not to say that the book of Job teaches that a person has no obligation to moral and righteous living, or to a commitment to truth and justice in the face of sin and evil.

What it does say, at least in large part, is that the believer has an obligation to examine his motivation in coming to and serving God—especially during times of great trial and suffering. Furthermore, the book does not support the mistaken idea that all suffering is for discipline, or that suffering is always connected with sin and evil. God does discipline, teach, guide, and direct through suffering, but he cannot be manipulated by a man-made system of blessing and cursing negatively called the theology of fixed recompense or positively labeled the theology of prosperity. Neither God nor his plan is obligated to man under any conditions. Once this is clarified and accepted, then the believer is free to examine his or her suffering on the basis of grace factors. All saints share in the “fellowship of his sufferings” (Phil. 3:10).

The answers to the questions, “Why do the righteous suffer?” and, “Why is evil allowed to exist?” cannot be satisfied by one explanation. The many reasons given in Scripture for personal suffering must all be examined in light of God's grace. Suffering taught Job that he was righteous because he had a grace relationship with the Righteous One, not because he had earned it. Job knew his God and responded with humility, love, and godly fear of God's sovereignty (42:1–2), realized God's inscrutability (42:3), reflected

on God's superiority (42:4), refocused on God's intimacy (Job 42:5), and repented of serving God from wrong motivation (42:6).

So, why did God put Job through all of this? Primarily it was to reveal himself to Job. Through this interrogation, God has taught Job that he alone created everything—the heavens and the Earth, and all that is in them—and he alone controls all that he created. He alone has the right to do with his own as he pleases. He is under no obligation to explain his actions to his creation. He alone is sovereign and unaccountable to anyone.⁸

It would, however, limit the impact of the book of Job if the scope of this message of grace and the purpose of Job's suffering was exclusively restricted to an expression of God's sovereignty. Can a community of suffering saints find other answers and applications here? Yes! Job's struggle and ultimate triumph gives those who suffer a great deal more to apply. For example, as demonstrated in the preceding pages, the book of Job teaches the reader that (1) God is not held to a preconceived, fixed, limited concept of retribution/recompense/prosperity theology; (2) sin is not always the basis for suffering; (3) accepting false tenets about suffering can cause one to blame and challenge God; (4) life under a retributive/recompense/prosperity theology is a legalistic system that not only distorts the application of the true precepts of God's Law, but also confines God and his grace to human standards of interpretation.

Furthermore, (5) Satan is behind this false system and delights in using it to afflict the righteous; (6) the devil's world is unfair and unjust and that, even though humanity may misunderstand the "ways" of God and the "whys" of life, a relationship with God is the only place a person will know justice; (7) life is more than a series of absurdities and unexplainable pains that one must simply endure, it is a life linked with the unseen purpose and destiny of God; (8) mankind does not always know all the facts, nor are they at all necessary for living a life of faith; (9) God's wisdom is above human wisdom; (10) God's protection and blessing is based solely on grace, not on a traditional, legalistic formula; (11) suffering can be faced with faith and trust in a loving gracious God even when there is no logical or rational reason to do so; (12) God does allow suffering, pain and even death, if it best serves his purpose and destiny for his creation; (13) prosperity/pragmatic religion has no place in God's grace plan; (14) suffering can be preventative and protective rather than simply merited; (15) the greatest of saints struggle with *theodicy*, and will continue to do so; and finally, (16) because God's people are intimately related to him, suffering is often specifically designed to glorify God in the unseen war with Satan.

Returning to the divine courtroom in chapter one, Satan, who was once very verbal, is silenced in chapter 42, because Job's response proves that God's confidence in him was not unfounded. Although God needs no vindication, the book of Job shows that undeserved suffering, accepted and borne by a child of God does, in a sense, vindicate God's grace plan for his saints.

"True wisdom, like God, defies human reason."⁹ Therefore, true wisdom defies the wrong concepts of traditional wisdom, and, when properly applied by God's people during undeserved suffering, it becomes a living demonstration of God's grace and man's faith: "I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear; But now my eye sees Thee" (42:5).

Notes

1. All Scripture quotations, unless noted otherwise, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers.
2. There is ample evidence that the setting of Job is patriarchal as an historical event, but the date of actual writing may have been much later. See Roy B. Zuck “Job,” In *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Old Testament*, edited by John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 717, for nine reasons the book of Job points to a patriarchal period. So also, Gleason L. Archer, *The Book of Job: God’s Answer to the Problem of Undeserved Suffering*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982), 16.
3. Francis I. Andersen, *Job: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 6465 (my emphasis).
4. L. D. Johnson, *Out of the Whirlwind: The Major Message of the Book of Job* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1971), 18.
5. See also 7:17–21; 9:22–24; 10:3; 12:12–25; 13:21–22; 14:18–22; 16:11, 13; 19:6, 21; 21:23; 27:2; 30:20; and 31:35.
6. Walter L. Michel, “Job’s Real Friend: Elihu,” *Criterion*, 21 (Spring 1982): 31.
7. James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1982), 124–125.
8. Steven J. Lawson, *When All Hell Breaks Loose*. (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1994), 245–48.
9. Crenshaw, 123.

About the Author

Dr. Larry Waters as Associate Professor of Bible Exposition at Dallas Seminary and taught for their World Missions and Intercultural Studies department. He served as a missionary in the Philippines from 1973 to 1999. His worldwide ministry included serving in the Philippines. He is the author of Bible and Missions curriculum for the Internet Biblical Seminary connected with BEE World, and a New Testament Survey for a large missionary organization. Larry also served as a Member of the Bibliotheca Sacra Editorial Advisory Committee.