

## • 30 • Job's Tribulations

*Job 1, 2*

*Date: era of the patriarchs*

JACOB'S TWELVE sons would later become known as the patriarch (Acts 7:8). Sometime during this era of the patriarchs a terrible drama unfolded elsewhere in the life of a man called Job.

Job lived in Uz, a place somewhere east of Canaan, probably in Edom. Like Melchizedek, he had a sufficiently wide knowledge of the most-high God, the unseen creator of the heavens and the earth, to serve as the basis for a life-changing relationship with Him. This important, God-fearing man shunned evil and tried to lead a blameless life. God blessed Job with seven sons and three daughters as well as with enormous herds. In fact, he was considered the greatest man among all the peoples of the East.

One day, however, a messenger rushed into Job's presence. "The Sabeans attacked! They carried off your oxen and donkeys and killed the servants!" the man bawled. "I'm the only one who managed to escape!" He was still speaking when another servant came running. "Lightening from heaven struck your sheep and shepherds! All perished and I am the only one to escape!" Then another man came running. "Chaldean raiders carried off your camels and killed the servants! I'm the only one who escaped!" he shouted. While he was still speaking a fourth servant came running and gasped, "Your sons and daughters were at a banquet when a mighty wind swept in from the desert and struck the house. It collapsed and killed them all! I'm the only one to get out alive!"



At this deluge of calamitous news Job tore his robe and shaved his head in sorrow. Then he fell to the ground and worshiped God! "I came naked from my mother's womb, and I will depart naked from this world," he said. "The Lord has given and the Lord has taken — may His name be praised." In spite of the overwhelming catastrophes, he refused to blame God.

But Job's troubles were not over. Some time later huge, painful boils broke out over his body. They

became so itchy that he found a shard of pottery and, sitting on an ash heap, scraped himself to get some relief. He was ruined, his health broken. At this disgusting sight his wife turned on him. "Are you still maintaining your integrity?" she lashed out. "Curse God and perish!"

"You are a foolish woman," Job remonstrated. "Shall we accept the good from God but not the bad?"

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What Job did not know was that he was the focus of a spiritual drama. God had summoned the angels and Satan into His presence, and demanded from the latter where he had been.

"I have roamed back and forth across the earth," Satan, who had usurped Adam's place as ruler of the world, replied (1 John 5:19).

"Did you notice my servant Job?" God asked. "He is blameless, unique among men in terms of his uprightness. He fears me and shuns evil."

"Little wonder," the accuser of God's people (Rev. 12:20) retorted. "You have put a hedge around him so that no evil can get through to him or his household. You bless everything he puts his hands to. You have made him wealthy and famous. But if you take away the things you've given him he will curse you to your face!"

"Go ahead! Do what you want with everything Job possesses," God responded. "Do not, however, touch the man himself." At this Satan left the presence of God and orchestrated the loss of Job's herds and children. What appeared like natural calamities from a human perspective was, in fact, Satan at work.

Sometime later the angels, including Satan, presented themselves once again to God.

"Where have you come from?" God asked Satan.

"I have roamed back and forth across the earth," Satan responded.

"Have you noticed how Job has maintained his integrity in spite of the fact that you incited me to permit you to ruin him without reason?" God said.

"Skin for skin," Satan replied. "A man will give all he has to preserve his life. Strike his skin and bones and he'll curse you to your face."

"He is in your hands," God said. "But you must spare his life." At this Satan left God's presence and caused Job to be afflicted by disgusting, itchy boils.

### • 31 • Job Argues With His "Comforters"

*Job 2:11-ch. 25*

*Date: era of the patriarchs*

WHEN SOME of Job's friends learned of the calamities which had overwhelmed Job they decided to visit him. Deeply shocked at the sight of their bankrupt friend sitting on an ash heap scraping his awful boils with a broken piece of pottery, they wept for him. They tore their

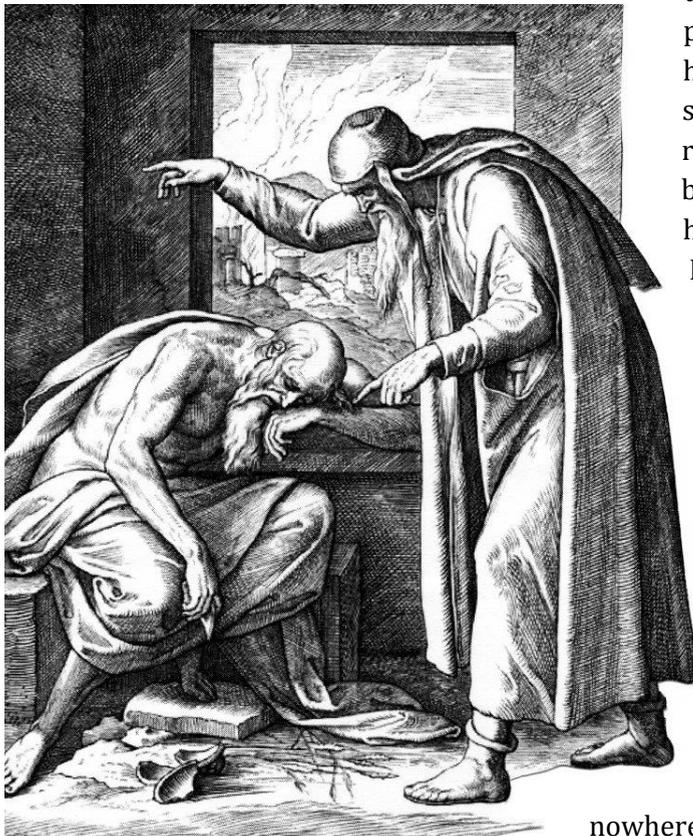
robes, put dust on their heads as a sign of their deep sorrow and sat in silence for a whole week, sharing their friend's deep misery and waiting for him to address them first.

When the calamities first hit, Job had shown great faith but the trials had taken their toll. "May the day I was born be cursed," he said when he eventually opened his mouth. "Would that I had been stillborn and not seen the light of day. Why is life given to those who long for death? My worst fears, all that I dreaded, have happened to me. I have no peace, no quietness, no rest; all I experience is turmoil!"

Then one of the friends, Eliphaz, spoke up. He reminded Job of his former glorious state, but noted that God does not punish the innocent. All Job needed to do was accept the Lord's discipline and his fortunes would surely change.

Job accepted Eliphaz's contention that his misfortunes stemmed from God, but resented the suggestion that God was disciplining him for some sin. "Show me what I have done wrong," he said, and I will be quiet!" Then he turned to God and burst out: "If I have sinned, what have I done wrong, O watcher of men? Why have you targetted me? In what way have I become a burden to you?"

Job's imperious challenge to God was too much for Bildad, the second of Job's friends. Eliphaz had spoken gently, but Bildad reacted heatedly at Job's outburst. "How can you say such things?" he demanded. "You are nothing but a blustery wind..." Bildad went on to argue



that because God is just He will not pervert justice, so the calamities which had befallen Job were proof of his sinfulness. He had deserved what he'd received from the hand of God and the best he could do was plead for mercy. If he did God would restore his fortunes. Bildad failed to see that pleading for mercy implied asking for forgiveness... and Job was convinced he had not done anything wrong to deserve all this.

"I know that what you are saying is true," Job acknowledged. He knew that God was righteous and just. He also knew that God was awesome, all-powerful and all-knowing. Job, however, was deeply frustrated. Was God a neutral, mysterious type of sovereign not accountable for his actions? If so any attempt on his part to vindicate himself would lead nowhere: he doubted God would give him a

hearing, and even if He did he ran the risk of being overwhelmed by a God who “mocked the despair of the innocent” and failed to administer justice. He questioned why he should maintain his integrity, since God had already treated him as if he were guilty. “If only there were someone who could mediate between God and us,” he complained, “then I would be able to defend myself... You know I am not guilty!” he cried out to God, “but no one can rescue me from your hand...” He then expressed his desire to die and be done with it all.

Job’s third friend was a hard, pitiless man name Zophar. Ignoring the possibility that Job might actually be innocent, he mocked his desire to know the real reason for his sufferings. He called Job “witless”, incapable of growing in wisdom, and urged him to “put away the sin that is in your hand”.

At this Job’s patience ran out. “Wisdom will die out with you,” he said acidly. “I’ve become a laughingstock to my friends, even though I am blameless. Those at ease are contemptuous of those less fortunate.” He then launched into a diatribe about the way God does whatever He pleases, irrespective of the good or bad consequences of His actions on people. “As for your maxims,” he said to his friends, “they are made of ash and your arguments of clay! Don’t interrupt me, let me finish speaking! I will not give up my hope in God—even if He slays me! I’m happy to present myself before Him, if I could, because I know I would be vindicated!” Then he addressed God directly again. “Just tell me what I’ve done wrong, God! Stop hiding your face from me. Call me and I will step forward and give an account of myself. Stop eroding my hope the way a torrent sweeps away the soil...”

This seemingly insolent response angered Eliphaz. “No wise man fills his belly with the hot east wind,” he stated; to him Job’s venting was nothing but hot air. He then made the point that men are essentially corrupt in God’s eyes, and that all of Job’s irreverent talk not only proved he was culpable but that he had become a bad example to others. He berated Job for his arrogance and repeated the traditional maxim that God punishes people because they shake their fist at Him. He then described the fate of the wicked in poetic terms, being careful to include all the calamities which had befallen Job: lightning, marauders, being stripped of one’s possessions, houses turned to rubble...

“You are all miserable comforters,” Job responded. “I’ve heard all those platitudes before. It’s easy for you to make long-winded speeches—I could do the same if I were in your place.” Then, once again, he turned to God, whom he perceived as his real enemy, as a merciless, pitiless tyrant. He was not God’s enemy, but God had become his enemy and apparently for no good reason! As for his friends, he considered them devoid of wisdom. Their worthless advice only made a bad situation worse, worse than death itself!

Bildad resented Job’s demeaning, belittling attitude to them. He curtly expressed his wish that Job stop placing himself at the center of things and start speaking some sense. Then, in heavily metaphorical and poetic terms, he expressed the opinion that Job had failed to come to grips with the doctrine that God punishes the wicked in this life.

“How much longer are you going to torment me?” Job cried in response. “All you do is reproach me and attack my integrity! God has wronged me, not I Him! But though I cry ‘I’ve

been wronged' He doesn't respond to me! I've been reduced to a stinking bag of bones. Have some pity, friends, for God has struck me." In spite of his mental turmoil Job suddenly cried out in faith. "I know that my Redeemer lives and that he will, one day, stand over my grave. Even though I die I will see God in the flesh, with my own eyes—how I yearn for that day! Don't tell me that the root of my troubles lies with me; in doing so you bring judgement on yourselves".

Zophar, the most emotional of the friends, was deeply offended—dishonored, in his own words—by Job's final remarks. He launched into an eloquent poem about the fact that the universe was moral; in the end, justice would prevail and those who do evil will lose out. The presumption, of course, was that things would go well with those who are righteous—as he considered himself to be. While Zophar insisted on a simplistic correlation between spiritual and physical wellbeing, Job was wrestling with his relationship with God irrespective of what was happening to him physically or materially.

Job was astonished by his friends' lack of sensitivity. They appeared deaf to what he was trying to say and bereft of compassion. He drove home the point that wicked people often lived happy and prosperous lives to the day they died! The implications of this terrified him so much that his body was seized with trembling, but the evidence was everywhere to be seen. "So stop trying to console me with your nonsense," he concluded. "Your answers are nothing but falsehoods".

"Is it for your piety that God is rebuking you?" Eliphaz responded sarcastically. "Your wickedness is great!" Then he launched into a volley of speculations on Job's sins and concluded with a moving call to repentance. "Submit to God and be at peace with him... Return to the Almighty and you will be restored... Pray to him and he will hear you... He will deliver even one who is not innocent..." Sincere as his words were, Eliphaz too failed to understand that Job's primary desire was not to return to health and wealth but to an understanding of God's mysterious, seemingly arbitrary, providential ways.

Job reacted to Zophar and Eliphaz's accusations by boldly reasserting once again that he was blameless. He again expressed his desire for a fair hearing with God, convinced that the encounter would vindicate him—terrifying though it would be. He expressed his deep frustration that although God knew exactly where he, Job, was, God would not let Himself be found. Using detailed observations about the nature of things he bolstered his contention that God does not, in fact, punish the wicked. In the end the wicked just die and are forgotten. "God does not charge anyone with wrongdoing... If this is not so, prove me false and reduce my words to nothing," he concluded.

Bildad then summed up his and his friends' contentions. "God is so awesome and pure that even the moon and the stars are impure in his eyes. That being so, who does man, who is but a maggot, think he is?"

Job dismissed with curt sarcasm Bildad's inane and hurtful contention that he was nothing but a hopeless, sinful worm. "What advice you offer, what wisdom you display! Who helped you utter these words, whose spirit spoke from your mouth?" he asked acidly. After poetically describing the power of God in nature he concluded that "these are only the fringe of his

works.” God’s ways were, indeed, mysterious and incomprehensible but that did not mean that man was a worthless worm. For Job, acknowledging mystery was more honest than holding to a tidy set of teachings which twisted the facts to fit the system. “I will never admit you are right; I will not deny my integrity until I die!” he asserted. His parting shot to his “friends” was a reminder of their theology—that God punishes the wicked—and applied it to them!

## • 32 • Elihu’s Speech

*Job 26-37*

*Date: era of the patriarchs*

JOB’S INTERACTION with his friends had come to an impasse. He refused to accept their simplistic theology, which could only be maintained by making him out to be an evil person, and they refused to accept that he did not deserve what he got.

None of these three friends were Israelites. Eliphaz was a descendant of Esau, the father of the Edomites (Gen. 36:12). He lived in Teman, an Edomite town known for its worldly wisdom (Oba. 1:9; Jer. 49:7). Bildad was a descendent of Shuah, a son of Keturah, Abraham’s second wife whose offspring settled in the Arabian peninsula (Gen. 25:1-2). Zophar came from the Naama tribe which was not listed among the clans of Israel. Job’s three friends could only offer the best of the traditional “worldly” wisdom of the era.

In Job’s final defense he recalled his glory days as a wealthy, respected community leader whose opinion mattered, to whom people turned for advice, and who had expected to live to a ripe old age. He then bemoaned the depths to which he had been reduced: disreputable youngsters mocked him and he had lost his dignity. Worst of all, God had afflicted him, but instead of giving him a reason for the affliction He had merely afflicted him even more! He concluded by proving his integrity and innocence by reciting all the things he had not done: he had not lusted after other women, had not lied, had not denied justice to anyone, had not withheld good things from the poor, nor had he trusted in the material things with which he was blessed. He had not rejoiced in his enemy’s misfortunes, nor withheld hospitality from anyone, nor treated his tenants unfairly, and he had not harboured any secret sin in his heart. Job had grown so confident of his own innocence and integrity that he boldly signed off on them: “I now sign my defence. Let the Almighty answer me... If I could I would give account to him of my every step, I would approach him boldly, like a prince!”

Suddenly a new character, “Elihu the son of Barakel”, stepped onto the stage. Elihu meant “God is Jehovah” and Barakel meant “God blesses”. He was a Jew and represented the wisdom of Israel.

Elihu was incensed at both Job’s self-righteousness and at the others’ inability to refute him. Unlike them, however, he did not falsely accuse Job of guilt or blame him for imaginary things. He had listened carefully to all that Job had said and—unlike the others—quoted him frequently. Although he was wordy and pompous, he was an eloquent, intelligent man not affected by the others’ rancorous attitudes. He had also picked up on an inconsistency in Job’s

argument. Job had questioned God's justice yet, if given the chance to present his case, he was convinced he would be vindicated because of it! Elihu responded that if God was capricious, what was the point of arguing one's case before him? He then went on to present a more balanced theology.

Elihu did not claim to understand what was taking place from God's perspective, but sought to assure Job that God's sovereign power and wisdom would, in the end, be redemptive. God, after all, was a gracious teacher who used suffering for various purposes, sometimes punitive, sometimes educative and sometimes disciplinary. He rejected Job's contention that God did not communicate with men, affirming that He did so through visions and dreams, as well as through pain and suffering. Elihu strongly and repeatedly affirmed that God only did what was right, and that He would punish evildoers. He also repeatedly pointed out that Job's contention that God treated the good and evil equally was both arrogant and wrong, as that would make God the author of evil. He then asserted that Job had kept company with evildoers, a roundabout critique of his non-Jewish "friends".

Elihu concluded his dialogue with a poem about the grandeur of God as seen in the thunderous power of the autumn rains and the winter storms. If man could not understand the recurring mysteries of nature, how could he possibly understand the mystery of divine providence? Just as no one could look at the sun after it had swept the skies clean, so also God's awesome majesty was beyond the reach of mere men. Questioning God's way was folly; man could only humbly revere Him.

### ▪ 33 ▪ God's Response to Job

*Job 38-42*

*Date: era of the Patriarchs*

AT LONG LAST God Himself responded to Job. Instead of giving him a straight answer, however, He picked up where Elihu had left off: He revealed His character by taking him on a journey through the wonders of nature. He also reprimanded him for some of the things he had said and the extreme language he had used during his ordeal. "Who is this who darkens my counsel with words without knowledge?" was the first in a long series of rhetorical questions in which God established His power and wisdom, and showed the severe limitations of human knowledge.

"Brace yourself like a man," God continued. He then plied Job with straightforward questions about the natural world, none of which he could answer. He had dared to question God's management of the created order; now God revealed just how little Job knew about it. "Will the one contending with the Almighty correct him?" God challenged. "Let God's accuser answer him!"

Humbled, Job acknowledged that he had no answer to God's questions. "I am not worthy; how can I reply? I will put my hand over my mouth and speak no more..." Gone was the attitude that if given the chance he would approach God like a prince! Gone was his self-assuredness. Although still afflicted with suffering, God's tour-de-force had chastened and humbled him.

However, he also came to realize that God was not his enemy! God had put him in his place, yet He had not accused him of any supposed sins committed prior to this period of severe trial!

But God was not yet finished. In a second series of rhetorical questions God established His power to punish the wicked and humble the proud. He rebuked Job for questioning His justice by giving vivid descriptions of two uncontrollable and probably mythical animals, behemoth and leviathan, to remind Job that He, the creator and sustainer of the natural order, was also Lord of the moral order. Wild beasts like “leviathan” symbolized evil world powers beyond the control of God’s people who would one day be judged and brought low (Psalm 74:12-14; Isa 26:21-27:1; Rev. 12:9).

Job got the message and confessed, repenting of his arrogance, “You can do all things, and your purposes cannot be thwarted. I spoke of things too wonderful for me, of things I did not understand. I had heard about you before, but now I have seen you. I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes”. God had so overwhelmed him with mysteries he could not explain that Job began to question his doubts. In so doing he came to accept that God knew what He was about. Without having his personal questions answered Job had become a true man of faith. The reassertion of God’s sovereign power, combined with the assurance that God was not, as he had come to think, his enemy but his friend, was enough to see Job through. God had not abandoned him in a capricious moment. Job’s soul was satisfied.

God then addressed Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, the three gentile “friends” who had insisted they spoke on His behalf. “I am angry with you because you did not speak right of me, as Job has.” God told them. Job had spoken with deep emotion and got some facts wrong, but he had sought to maintain his intellectual and moral integrity as he presented his case with brutal honesty before God. They, on the other hand, had parroted beautiful sentiments about God, misunderstood what was actually going on, and slandered their friend mercilessly. God ordered them to go to Job with seven bulls and seven rams, offer sin offerings, and ask Job to intercede on their behalf. Job readily agreed to do so.

After Job had prayed for them his brothers, sisters and other friends and acquaintances came to visit him. They had kept their distance during his trials, but now came with a gift of a piece of silver and a gold ring. Fellowship was restored, and the Lord blessed the latter part of Job’s life more than the first. His flocks doubled to what they had been before, he had another seven sons and three beautiful daughters, and he lived to be “old and full of years”.

Job, the greatest man of the East, was not part of the covenant community of Israel and had not received the revelations of the patriarchs. He had no idea that he had played a role in an invisible spiritual contest. Yet his faith, though shaken, was vindicated. Although God had not fully explained the reason for his mysterious suffering he, like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, had discovered that persevering faith pleases God.