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Understanding Suffering, Evil and the Unfathomable Wisdom of God



Reflections on the Book of Job

QUEK KOH CHOON







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III





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UNDERSTANDING SUFFERING, EVIL AND THE UNFATHOMABLE WISDOM OF GOD

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INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

The book of Job is one of the books of wisdom literature in the Scriptures. The man Job is a righteous God-fearing non-Israelite, who somehow knew the God of Israel. Although it deals with his suffering, it ultimately points to the debate about who ultimately has true wisdom, God or man. Job's sufferings provided the context and occasion for this debate: why did Job suffer; what was the solution to his suffering; can we say that we understand all the reasons for suffering and evil; and how does God control the universe.

What is the cause for suffering and prosperity? As a simplistic answer, the book clearly dismisses the retribution principle, which states that the upright will prosper because of their righteousness and the wicked will suffer because of their evil. The story of Job begins with God's affirmation of Job's integrity and righteousness. Even the Accuser, Satan, did not challenge this. Nonetheless, Job suffered and his sufferings were of the extreme kind, leading to the loss of his wealth, property, loved ones and even his health. He was not aware of the presence of the Accuser and he was perplexed as to why he had to suffer to this degree. This is a case of bad things happening to good people. It cuts through the validity of the prosperity gospel which claims that the righteous will always be blessed by God, enjoying prosperity, wealth and good health. Job, in defending himself against the accusations of his friends, queried why the wicked seemed to prosper and did not suffer much in this life. So good things can also happen to bad people.

After experiencing so much suffering, his friends appeared on the scene presumably to comfort him. However, they only added to his distress. For they ended up by concluding that Job was suffering for his sins and needed to repent to come out of these sufferings. Job, however,





insisted that he did nothing that was so unrighteous to deserve all that had come upon him. To this, his friends were taken aback, feeling that Job was committing blasphemy and not honestly facing the situation.

We see in the long discourses of Job's friends individuals who claimed to be wise but displaying the lack of true wisdom. In the conclusion of the book, God declared that they had not spoken what was right about God.

Job himself reasoned that if he did not act in an unrighteous manner, then God must be unfair to cause him to suffer so much. He demanded an audience with God to argue his case. Although Job initially was steadfast in his loyalty to God, he subsequently began to complain about God and His treatment of him. Job's suffering in his sickness was rather severe and there seemed to be no end to his pain and agony. Emotionally, he had to endure the abandonment of his friends, his relatives and even his own wife.

This incident reveals that ill health is not necessarily due to sin and the fact that there is no healing does not mean that God is displeased with the one who is sick. It also points to the reality that God does not always heal. Nonetheless, Job's severe suffering caused him to lament regarding his fortune and to continue to query why God was targeting him. Job finally admitted his lack of wisdom when God confronted him, realising that he was in no position to question the Almighty. He had to acknowledge that he was ignorant and God was both all-powerful and wise.

The book of Job tells us that suffering is often a mystery. It does not mean that the one who suffers is always sinful and deserves to suffer. It does not negate the fact that sin can lead to suffering. The one who suffers may in fact be one favoured by God and Job suffered





precisely because he was declared as one who was a good servant of God. We may not understand fully why we suffer but the book teaches us to trust God and His wisdom in the midst of suffering, for God is perfect in His wisdom. He is perfectly good and loving.

We are introduced early on to the presence of the Accuser. When we look at the subject of suffering, we must not forget the reality of spiritual warfare and the role of a formidable foe in the person of Satan. The Accuser questioned Job's motivation to be righteous: was Job being righteous in order to enjoy God's blessings of material prosperity, good health, happy family and other benefits? What if these were removed? Will Job still maintain his righteousness and loyalty to God? Do we also strive to be righteous in order to enjoy God's blessings? Do we quickly abandon God when we encounter pain and suffering? Do we only retain loyalty to God when He blesses us with good health, happy relationships among friends and family, and material security? Are we quick to complain, "Why is God doing this to me?" when we encounter sufferings.

One positive aspect in Job's response is that he continued to pursue God to get an answer. He did not give up believing in God. He only wanted an answer to his perplexity as to why he had to suffer so. He did not agree with the accusations of his friends. He remained honest, not willing to agree to falsehoods in order to appease God and to get out of his suffering. He was also quick to repent "*in dust and ashes*" (42:6) when he knew he had overstepped his position. For he had forgotten that he was just a creature who had dared to question the creator, who holds all things together and has good reasons for all that He allows in this world.

The book of Job also gives a hint of one who also suffered innocently but suffered voluntarily, one who took on the penalty for the





sins of the world in order to vanquish evil and death, to renew God's creation to what He has desired from the beginning. This is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ. At the cross, He corrected the 'disorder' of the world following the fall of man in Genesis. He also completed the task of restoring and installing God's kingdom. Subsequently, all will submit to the Lord Jesus at His second coming as he brings the new heaven to the new earth.

Job's cry for a redeemer and a mediator for his case has been fulfilled in the coming of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.



Chapter 1 and 2

PROLOGUE

Chapter one of Job introduces the person of Job, a man highly regarded by God as one who was blameless, God-fearing and righteous. He was also wealthy with a great deal of livestock and servants. Thirdly, he had ten children, seven sons and three daughters. Job was not only righteous in his own life but he was also concerned that his children did not sin against God.

In this chapter, the curtain was removed for us to see what was happening in the spiritual realm. Here we see God putting forth the good example of Job. However, Satan, the Accuser, claimed that Job only feared God in order to receive all the benefits. Satan challenged God that if Job's material benefits are removed, Job will no longer be loyal to God. God, in His permissive will, allowed Satan to test Job by removing all his material benefits.

Job lost his livestock, camels, servants and all his children in successive incidents rather quickly. But Job did not sin against God; instead, he worshiped the Lord God and declared that the Lord God gave and also took away. He blessed the name of God.

In chapter two, we see, in the spiritual realm, the Lord God praising Job in the presence of the Accuser. He claimed that in spite of Satan's efforts, Job kept his integrity. Satan then declared that Job had not reached his breaking point and he would deny God if his own body and health were affected badly. God permitted Satan to cause Job's health to be targeted but He did not permit the Accuser to take away Job's life. Satan caused Job to have sores, boils and itch in his whole body. He had to scratch himself to relieve his itch and bore the pain of this severe ailment. His condition was so bad that when his





three friends came to comfort him, they cried on seeing his condition. Job's wife told him to 'curse God and die', but Job rebuked her saying that one must be prepared to receive bad and good from God and not complain. In all this, Job did not sin against God.

Notice that it was not only Job who was undergoing trials, but God's policies and wisdom were being questioned by the Accuser. He, in effect, was claiming that God was deluded to think that Job would be righteous and blameless without the benefits God showered upon him. If the benefits were removed, Job would also lose his righteousness. God was confident that Job would still be loyal to him even if his benefits were removed. He was proven right when Job responded with worship after being struck down with one calamity after another.

We see Job suffering not because of his sin but because he was favoured by God and was singled out as one who was truly God-fearing and blameless. Even after he was inflicted with sickness, Job did not sin against God. Even though his wife, probably influenced by Satan, told him to curse God and die, Job maintained his stand that one must be prepared to receive both good and evil from the hand of God. God was again proven right and it demonstrates that a man can love God for Himself and not just to get benefits from God.

Even though Satan departed from the scene, he was still working behind the scenes, namely, using Job's wife and probably manipulating various individuals to make Job's suffering more unbearable so that he would deny God. Job's physical illness also involved emotional suffering. Later chapters show that although Job was regarded with much respect in his community in the past, now he had to endure jeering from children, and others kept their distance from him, spitting at him and taunting him. He cried for help without receiving any answer and he could not understand why God was cruel to him. Take note that Job was not aware of a being called Satan and he





thought that all his sufferings came from God. Job's positive response to God was even more commendable in this light.

We see that sufferings are not necessarily due to sin; we note the spiritual realm and the presence of a formidable foe.

Satan, however, can only operate with God's permission. Indeed, God is sovereign, perfectly wise and good. Whatever He allows is according to His wisdom in ordering the cosmos and the world. But we must also recognise that after the fall, this is a broken world, plagued with broken relationships and disorder. It is in this context that God operates. For now he provides some provisional justice but He is working tirelessly and will ultimately right all wrongs as He ushers in the new heaven and new earth. This is where justice prevails, and evil and suffering will disappear. This He will effect with the coming of the Son of Man who will accomplish victory by His suffering and death. This is a victory over death, the Accuser, the power of sin and the penalty of sin. He will exhaust all the power of evil at the cross of Calvary. In the meantime, the context is a broken world, a context of disorder. Additionally, God's intended creation is not yet complete - the restoration and renewal of creation is yet to be finished. This will happen at Jesus' second coming when He removes the presence of sin and suffering; simultaneously, He will bring vindication to God's faithful people.

Before this, suffering and evil are to be expected. We should not be surprised when suffering and evil hit us in the face. We must not be deluded into thinking that the world is still basically all right and all problems and suffering can be resolved with progress in technology, education and political will. When disaster strikes; when man acts cruelly against fellow man; when world wars come and go; when natural calamities take place; and even when we stumble in our walk with Jesus, let us be reminded that this is a broken world and God is still not finished with restoring His creation.





The end of Chapter two sees Job's three friends coming to comfort him. They mourned with him. They empathised with him in his suffering and sat silently with him for seven days and nights. Likewise, the suffering Christian needs fellow believers to rally around him, to comfort him, to pray for him and with him and to show empathy. Sometimes, being present in silence may be all that is needed. The wrong counselling, the wrong doctrines expressed at such a time may cause more pain for the one suffering. This we shall see in the subsequent chapters in the book of Job.

We see also that suffering without any hope of things getting better is not easy to endure. This is where Christian perseverance, endurance and faith come into play. Keeping the right perspective, keeping faith in a perfectly good, loving and wise Creator is needful. When we are perplexed God needs us to trust Him explicitly, not to understand Him comprehensively.



Chapter 3

JOB'S LAMENTATIONS

The chapter begins with Job lamenting. He cursed the day of his birth and felt that it would have been better if he were not born. He went on to wish that he perished at birth. Job was in a state of despair and depression. To him, death would end his sufferings and pain, for death will mean rest and escape from all his agony. Job seemed to think that this applied to all, including the wicked, and that death would lead to final rest. He felt that God had hedged him in, and there was no escape from all his sufferings. There seemed to be no way out.

From one angle, we can identify with Job and feel that it is understandable for him to despair; it just shows that Job was human. We would probably respond in the same manner and may fare even worse than him.

However, we need to pause and consider. What would be the result if Job were not born? Job was one highly regarded by God. God in fact had confidence in Job to a point that He pointed him out to the Accuser, describing Job as a rare individual who was blameless, godly and righteous. God allowed the Accuser to test Job, knowing that he would pass the test and prove that a man can love God for Himself and not for the benefits he can receive. Job also demonstrated that extreme suffering and ill health may not necessarily affect a man's loyalty to God.

Imagine the glory and honour given to God in Job's testimony and response to suffering. This was seen on earth and also in the heavenly realm as the other angels saw Satan proven wrong by this godly man. It shows how a godly response to suffering can be such a powerful testimony for God and His kingdom.





In Ezekiel 14:14, Job was highlighted as one of three godly men whose presence would not deter God from punishing His people for their sin. The other two were Noah and Daniel. If Job were to die at birth or if he were not born, then we would not have benefited from the example of his godliness, perseverance and patience (James 5:11). God chose Job to manifest His wisdom and glory. Thus, God disproved Satan's accusation that people only serve God for the benefits they receive.

If only Job were aware that he was suffering because he was favoured by God and that he was demonstrating a powerful testimony for God's sake. He would have rejoiced. He would not have despaired and wished that he were not born, or that he died at birth.

Job's understanding of death was defective. He thought that death would bring rest for all. Going back to Genesis chapter three, we note that God intended human beings made in His image to experience a nobler end than the disintegration we call death. Satan denied the truthfulness of God when he told Eve that "*when you eat of the forbidden fruit, you will not surely die*" (Genesis 3:4). For God had warned Eve and Adam, "*when you eat of it you will surely die*" (Genesis 2:17). Death came about as a penalty for disobedience to God. It is not God's ultimate intention for human beings. In fact, death is the final enemy. God destroyed death and the power of sin through His Son who exhausted all the power of evil and sin at the cross. When Jesus met Martha and Mary at the passing of Lazarus, He wept because He was grieved on seeing the pain and suffering ensuing from death. The New Testament clearly shows that death is not rest for the wicked; an eternal fire and suffering await them. However, God's children can anticipate rest, freedom from suffering, sickness and death.

Recalling the negative example of Esau who chose immediate pleasure at the expense of eternal reward, we can also make a similar mistake by choosing immediate release from pain and suffering at the





expense of eternal well-being. Job was at the verge of making such a mistake in his lamentation.

A positive example in the response to suffering is seen in the life of Apostle Paul. We are familiar with the severe sufferings Paul went through which include thirty-nine lashes five times, beatings with rods three times, being pelted with stones, ship-wrecked three times, encountering dangers from Jews and Gentiles, and enduring hunger, cold and sleeplessness (2 Corinthians 11).

Yet notice how Paul described his sufferings: *“For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all”* (2 Corinthians 4:17). In Romans 8:18, Paul wrote, *“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us”*.

The apostle Paul considered his sufferings as light and momentary troubles. Admittedly, we may not consider his list of sufferings as light and momentary if we were in his sandals. Nevertheless, he saw the eternal glory that will be achieved through sufferings in a godly manner and he even went as far as to state that his sufferings were not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in eternity. Not only is the comparison considered as temporary and light when compared to the coming eternal glory; he even felt that it was not worth comparing as the eternal glory far outweighs all these sufferings.

So Paul may be perplexed in his sufferings and trials but he “did not lose heart”; he did not sink into despair and discouragement. If only Job could see and understand what the apostle Paul saw and understood, he probably would not have sunk into despair and depression. He would not have felt that it was all darkness and gloom; he would have persevered and overcome the overwhelming trials and sufferings without wishing for death at birth.





The chapter ends with Job stating that all his fears and dread came to pass in his life.

Isaiah 26:3 states: “You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you”. It reminds us that the more faith, the more inward peace and quietness; if little faith, then little peace and serenity through the storms that unbelieving fears will surely gather.

We need to remember that fears are not from God. They make us vulnerable to the Accuser. For the enemy knows our fears and these are areas he can target to cause us to lose our faith and peace in God. Do we live our lives with certain fears which have not been surrendered to God? Are we prepared to surrender all to God and know that He is always good and loving whatever He allows in our lives? Satan is always denying not only God’s truthfulness; he also always denies God’s goodness. He makes the permitted things seem unsatisfying and the forbidden things seem desirable. He continually claims that God is not truly good, and that He is not seeking our welfare but our impoverishment. He portrays God as one who is denying us what is good when, in effect, God seeks our welfare and eternal good.

Although we cannot give all the answers to why there is evil and sufferings and why the godly suffer, we know enough from the Scriptures that God can use sufferings and even evil to bring about good in our lives ultimately. He is the author of all things, and in that light everything has to be traced to Him as the cause; but He is not the causation of specific evil and sufferings. These may be from the evil one or they may be the result of the disorder from the fall in Genesis. They can also be present because God has not yet completed His plan and intention for creation and human beings.

God is not absent from our sufferings. He seeks to end all evil and sufferings with the coming of His Son. When Jesus wept at Lazarus’ death, we know that God not only can empathise with





us in our sufferings, He also suffers with us in our sufferings. When Saul persecuted the Church, the Lord Jesus asked him why he was persecuting Him. When Saul persecuted the believers, he was in fact persecuting Jesus. Jesus suffers with His church in her sufferings. We need not despair and feel that God does not care. He is with us in our pain; He understands our grief and He continually intercedes for us and pours out His grace so that we may triumph in our sufferings and in the face of evil.







Chapter 4 to 28

THE DIALOGUE WITH JOB'S THREE FRIENDS

The silence of Job's three friends was broken from chapter four of Job. The next twenty-four chapters record for us the dialogue between Job and his three friends. The friends were trying to diagnose Job's problems and the reasons for his intense sufferings. It consists of three cycles of speeches; after each friend spoke, Job replied until all three had spoken in each cycle. Then a new cycle began and ran its course, followed by a third cycle in which only Eliphaz and Bildad spoke. Zophar remained surprisingly quiet.

The tone of the first cycle was set by Job's lament in chapter three. As the dialogue proceeded, the tone intensified from detached sympathy to derogatory condemnation on the part of the three friends. Although the three friends heard Job's insistence on his innocence, they failed to read his heart. As the dialogue moved on, they caused such pain and despair to Job to the point that Job dismissed them as miserable counsellors. Job fruitlessly appealed to them for pity and compassionate friendship and understanding.

We need to take note that the speeches of the three friends in the first cycle expressed the understanding of the principle of retribution stated by Eliphaz in 4:8, "As I have observed, those who plow evil and those who sow trouble reap it". Eliphaz concluded that Job had brought the misfortune upon himself. Admittedly, Eliphaz realised that it is a blessing for God to use suffering to reprove and correct (5:17-18). He urged Job to turn back to God and ask for mercy and grace.

Bildad extended this principle by appealing to traditional teaching (8:8-10) and natural law (8:11-19). He proclaimed that God





is just. Thus, God blesses the righteous and punishes the wicked (8:20-22). Zophar added on, saying that because God has unsearchable wisdom, nothing escapes Him (11:5-12); His justice cannot be challenged. He insisted that although Job protested his innocence, there must be some hidden sin that had led to his suffering and he should confess it (11:13-20).

The second and third cycles of speeches built on the first. Having concluded that Job's suffering was a consequence of his sin, the scale and intensity of the disasters befalling Job must point to some great wickedness on Job's part. Zophar even speculated that Job's earlier prosperity must have resulted from him exploiting the poor (20:10).

What the three friends were saying is not essentially wrong in terms of the principle stated and this is also expressed in other parts of Scripture. But the error is their rigid application of the principle. As a general rule, God judges sin and rewards the righteous but this does not mean that all misfortune is evidence of a wicked life or that all prosperity is a sign of a godly life. Job was not claiming to be sinless but he maintained that he had done nothing to bring about the dramatic change in the circumstances of his life. His protests to the accusations of his friends were taken as an unwillingness to humble himself and this indicated an even greater sin. They did not diagnose Job's problems accurately and in fact added on to his distress and agony.

In one sense, they drove Job to launch his complaint against God. Job felt ostracised. He was alienated from God and man, a lone challenger in an unfriendly universe, forced to face reality alone. Job protested that he was not inferior to his friends in understanding but they did not understand his pain. Even at the risk of death, Job would continue to argue his case against God. He began to accuse God of harassing him senselessly and he appealed to God to leave him alone so that he may not come to a point of sinning grievously against God before he expired.





Yet in chapter twenty eight, Job, in a beautiful poem, stressed that wisdom cannot be found in the realm of the living or in the realm of death (28:20-22). Verses 23-28 constitute a beautiful climax: only God knows the way to wisdom. Although wisdom is not detected by human ingenuity, it nevertheless manifests itself in human life. The conclusion, “The fear of the Lord - that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding” (28:28). Job still clung to his belief in God despite the adverse situation he was in; he only wanted to hear from God why He was targeting him and what was it he had done to deserve this seemingly unfair treatment. Although the friends were urging him to admit his sins, Job could not honestly agree to do so just to appease God. For he knew that his sufferings were not because of unrighteousness on his part. From the prologue we know that Job was not suffering because of unrighteousness. On the contrary, he was suffering because of his righteousness and blamelessness.

There are many lessons we can draw from the dialogue; we will look into them subsequently. But at this point, we can realise the limitation of man’s wisdom and realise that true wisdom only dwells with God. We need to be careful not to wrongfully judge others. Rather, we need to be open to be corrected regarding our unwholesome conclusions about others and our lack of discernment.

FURTHER LESSONS FROM THE DIALOGUE

Job’s three friends were rather close friends as seen by their willingness to visit him to comfort him and to remain silent with him for seven days and nights. They would have known him to be a godly person and one who was generous, kind and helpful.

We see this expressed by Eliphaz:

“Think how you have instructed many, how you have strengthened feeble hands. Your words have supported those who





stumbled; you have strengthened faltering knees. But now trouble comes to you, and you are discouraged; it strikes you, and you are dismayed. Should not piety be your confidence and your blameless ways your hope”? (4:3-6).

In the light of this, should not the three friends be slow to accuse Job of sin and wrongdoing? It reminds us to be especially careful not to speak negatively of those who are generally godly and spiritual and those who are holding important leadership and responsibilities in Christian ministry. We need to examine the facts and issues clearly before making concluding observations that may affect God’s ministry and glory.

Also, we notice that the three friends, as the dialogue progressed, became aggressive and reactive towards Job and became more concerned about defending their theology and winning the argument rather than listening to the heart and sincere ‘truth’ proceeding from Job. They were even prepared to accuse Job of wicked deeds when they knew that this was unlikely in a man like Job.

This teaches us to be more concerned about truth than about reputation and being seen as spiritual in the eyes of men and our colleagues. We must not forget that God is a God of truth and truth matters very much to Him. The evil one, on the other hand, is always distorting the truth and casting doubt on God’s goodness and righteousness. If we are not careful, we may unknowingly be used by the adversary to be tools in his design to destroy God’s people and His ministry. We must be humble and open enough to acknowledge that we may be wrong in our discernment and conclusions even though it may cost a dent in our reputation.

We need to be careful that we do not contribute to the breaking and breakdown of a godly brother or sister because of our careless words and gossip. This can be tantamount to speaking negatively about God





Himself if the brother or sister concerned is highly regarded by the Lord. Notice that God rebuked the three friends at the end and asked Job to pray for them. God was angry with them even though they thought they were defending God and His justice by confronting Job.

Our apparent good intentions may actually be poisonous and good intention may not necessarily end up with positive results if they are not backed up by wholesome truth and understanding of the person and the situation concerned.

Let us be quick to listen and slow to speak as counselled by Apostle James, and let not many of us seek to be teachers, for it will incur a greater accountability before God.





Chapter 29 to 31

JOB'S MONOLOGUE AND FINAL DEFENSE

Job recalled the past when he was well respected for his integrity, righteousness and wisdom. He shared that he used to help the poor (29:12), the fatherless and widows (29:130); he was eyes to the blind, father to the needy (29:15-16). We note the verse in James 1:27, “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and spotless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world”. Job certainly fulfilled the first part of this verse; his godliness was practical and he ministered to the poor, the marginalised and the needy. He was one whose religion was pure and spotless in this regard. It was not just words but deeds. He was one who was looked up to when there was a need for wise counsel; he took pains to minister justice and dealt with wicked individuals. Job even defended the strangers in administering justice and he comforted the mourners (29:16, 25).

But Job's godliness was not just seen in the external words and deeds; he also fulfilled the second part of the verse in James. He kept himself unpolluted by the world. His was a righteousness and godliness manifested in the inner being; Job's integrity and blamelessness were demonstrated inwardly. He was careful not to let lust affect him in his heart when he looked at a girl; Job ensured that there was no falsehood in his business dealings and no unfair treatment of his employees. He did not allow wealth to corrupt him and prevent him from helping those in need; he refrained from idol worship of the sun or the moon and he even dealt kindly with his enemies. We see some of these exhortations in the Sermon on the Mount by the Lord Jesus in Matthew chapter five, and Job kept the spirit of these teachings essentially in his heart. It is no wonder that God regarded Job





highly and asked, *“Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil”* (Job 1:8).

Notice that by fearing God and shunning evil, Job fulfilled the definition of wisdom from the biblical point of view. More than that, Job even took oaths about his uprightness and was prepared to suffer repercussions should these claims be untrue. This shows the sincerity and reality in the inner being of this godly man. It was not just empty claims; Job was prepared to back up his claims with oaths (Job 31:7,16-23).

Here we are reminded that there is a great difference between external religiosity and fear of God in the heart. The legalists are those who take pains to demonstrate religiosity outwardly and they are quick to condemn others who do not fulfil their understanding of what it means to be godly in “keeping the moral rules”. Others looking at them may even consider them to be spiritual without seeing the reality within. An interesting fable may illustrate this.

“There is a fable wherein the devil once was crossing the Libyan desert and met a group of friends tempting a holy hermit. They tried seductions of the flesh, they sought to sow his mind with doubts and fears, they told him that all his discipline and uncompromising righteousness were worth nothing. But it was all in vain. The holy man was unmoved. The devil then stepped forward. ‘Your methods are too crude. Permit me one moment to make a recommendation’. Going to the hermit, he said, ‘Have you heard the news? Your brother has been made Bishop of Alexandria.’” According to the fable, a “scowl of malignant jealousy clouded the serene face of the holy man”.

Job did not claim to be perfect but he certainly was a unique and outstanding individual, even in the eyes of God. God had confidence in such a man to face the test of the Accuser and Job did not fail Him.





Job had shared the degree of his fall from grace and the level of his sufferings, which were physical, mental, social, emotional and spiritual. He lost the blessings of family and home (29:3-6); he lost the respect of young and old (29:7-11) and people no longer looked up to him as a wise counsellor (29:21).

He now was the target of mocking, spitting and ridicule even from the vagabonds and downtrodden of society. They detested him and kept their distance from him (30:1). His body was infested with sores and he had no rest but experienced grievous pain and fever, his cry to God received no answer (30:15-20).

The gospels tell the real story of God becoming man in Jesus Christ. He, the long awaited Messiah, was God's plan to defeat evil, death and the power of sin once and for all. He was sinless and innocent; He took upon Himself the task to become a man, a servant, and a representative of the human race to die on its behalf for their sins.

The gospels tell us a story of the downward spiral of evil, which finally hit the bottom and resulted in the crucifixion of this God-man who came to declare the coming of the kingdom of God. We see evil in all its forms coming together: the corrupt political power manifested by Rome, Pilate and Herod; the jealousy and blindness of the Jewish spiritual leaders; the corruption within the nation of Israel itself as they cried out "Crucify him"; the betrayal of Judas Iscariot and the desertion of the disciples; the false accusations of many witnesses; the violence of the whipping and crucifixion; and its humiliation with the Son of God being mocked, stripped naked and publicly displayed. The forces of evil were given a free reign and operated within all the human elements described above. Evil was allowed to do its worst; what was seen as seemingly the greatest victory for Satan was and is in fact his greatest defeat. All of evil and its power was exhausted at the cross when Jesus voluntarily and willingly took the sins of the world upon His shoulders and paid the price for it. The words of Joseph to





his brothers from long before pointed to this reality, *“You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives”* (Genesis 50:20).

When Jesus suffered, He did not curse, and when He was insulted, He did not insult in return (1 Peter 2:23). All the cosmic evil was met by the sovereign saving love of God the creator in His Son at the cross. Evil was fully and completely dealt with; death has lost its sting; sin has lost its power; the penalty of sin has been fully paid. Those in bondage have been released and the presence of sin will be completely wiped out. The gospels tell the real story of the extent of the sufferings of the perfect man who embraced the will of God. He did this because of His love for men and for the glory of God the Father. He knew the agony that awaited Him at Calvary; He could have come down from the cross; His cry of “My God, my God why have you forsaken Me?” was not one of complaint or doubt; it was an agonising cry of having to be ‘separated’ from the eternal Father with whom He has fellowship from all eternity for that moment when all the evil was unleashed on Him and He carried the filth, the darkness and gruesome sins of the human race upon Himself. Yet, He did not flinch until He could say, “It is finished”, fulfilling His statement at the garden, “Not my will but your will be done”.

Job’s sufferings must surely remind us of the sufferings of the Son of Man. We cannot say that God did not care for the sufferings of the righteous. It was not that God was far off. He empathises with us; He intercedes for us; He suffers with us. God was not and is not passive. The cross is the testimony that He did deal with evil and sufferings; it is the testimony of His undying love for us; it is a demonstration that God so loves the world that He has sent His one and only beloved Son to die for us, even to eliminate evil and sufferings once for all. The kingdom of God has come; it is coming and it will come in all its fullness and beauty when the Son comes again.





Chapter 32 to 37

THE ELIHU'S SPEECHES

Here we are introduced to a young man named Elihu. He had waited patiently before speaking up and he had been listening to all that transpired. He thought it polite to let the older men speak first but here he became impatient and angry. He was angry at Job's three friends because they had found no answer even though they had declared Job to be in the wrong (32:2-3). He was also angry with Job for justifying himself before God. Notice that Elihu claimed that wisdom is present in man as a gift from God and that one need not wait for the tempering of time before it can be called wisdom (32:8). This is true and Job did say it, perhaps in a better way (28:28). However, Elihu demonstrated inflated self-confidence and his speeches did not subsequently justify his claim that wisdom is a gift of God. However, age and experience cannot be written off as simply as Elihu claimed. Age and experience do in fact contribute to the nurturing of wisdom in many cases.

The gist of Elihu's contribution was that God sends suffering for man's discipline and correction (33:14-30; 37:13). Eliphaz had briefly referred to this and Elihu elaborated on it. He saw suffering as God's purpose to prevent man from destroying himself (33:17-28, 30; 36:16). Suffering, to Elihu, can help keep man from sin rather than being punishment for his sin. Elihu still subscribed to the retribution principle but he reconfigured it with an anticipatory role. So he could agree that Job may not have committed any great sin in the past but Job's sufferings anticipated and demonstrated an obvious character flaw, which became evident as his problems unfolded. From the prologue, we know that God did not send sufferings to Job to unveil a flaw in his character. In fact, God declared Job as righteous and blameless.

What is interesting is that Elihu declared that Job's three friends,





who were older, and generally recognised as wise men, were not wise in the way they interacted with Job. In his retorts to Job, although he did mention true characteristics of God, his conclusions about Job as being rebellious, proud and unwise were not accurate. Elihu put himself above Job in his claim to having true wisdom; yet, in reality, true wisdom does not belong to the old or to the young among men. In the case of Job, all present could not fully understand why Job suffered. Although Job himself possessed much wisdom, he could not comprehend fully why he had to suffer to such a degree.

The Bible as a whole gives many different reasons for suffering. We might suffer because of our sin. We might also suffer because someone else sinned. We might suffer because the world is broken, because of the fall of man. We might suffer like the man born blind so that God might be glorified (John 9:1-3). We might suffer because God's creation of the new heaven and earth is not yet complete. In this present age creation and man long for release from bondage to this current situation. At times, we cannot fully understand and know why we suffer just like Job. But we do need to trust God and His perfect wisdom. For He alone is wise enough to rule the world, and He wants us to trust Him fully rather than try to understand in detail how He orders the running of the universe. This we shall see in the following chapters of Job.

So many chapters were recorded in the three cycles of dialogue between Job and his three friends and also several chapters were given to the speeches of Elihu. Many questions are raised. Why is there suffering and evil? What can we say about suffering of the righteous? The answers do not arise simplistically. Perhaps, suffering tells us that something is wrong. If there were no suffering, how many of us would be concerned either with God or with the welfare of others? The intensity and breadth of suffering indicate the magnitude of the wrongness in this world and the enormous problem of sin in the human race.





In one sense, the question “Why is there suffering?” assumes that God exists and that suffering has meaning. When something has meaning, it serves to point to something else. If suffering has meaning, we must look beyond the suffering to a personal One who gives it meaning.

Without God, the question “Why is there suffering” is pointless because there can be no “why” to suffering or any other evil. Humans instinctively ask “why” because they instinctively know that the sovereign God is supposed to be good. When we stop asking why, our humanity dies. If there is no sovereign God, then our existence and deeds are all simply the product of chance. There can be no such thing as morality, or good and evil.

Only those with an extremely powerful imagination or indifference can succeed in denying that there is evil in the world. We can claim that pain is amoral, but as soon as one says that the Holocaust was wrong or genocide is wrong, the universe is assumed to be moral and a moral creator has tacitly been assumed. Those who deny such a creator claim that there is no absolute wrong or right since nothing governs the whole universe. But when we ask the question, “Was Hitler’s ‘final solution’ absolutely wrong?”, we need to admit in the depths of our guts that certain things are wrong and certain things are right. This consciousness of right and wrong cannot possibly be in our system by chance.







Chapter 38:1 to 42:6

GOD SPEAKS

An unexpected and surprising event happened. God appeared and spoke to Job out of a storm. The storm reminds us of the majesty and power of God as seen in God's appearance to Israel on Mount Sinai. Yet God spoke to Job in a personal manner just like He spoke to Moses face to face. Although the language was challenging and harsh, God did not reveal Himself to crush Job but to reach out to him in grace. It was a privilege extended to His servant Job to communicate that He was not distant and indifferent, but He was in fact conscious of what was happening to him.

God appeared and spoke as a gracious, personal God and as an infinite, overwhelming force at the same time.

However, God did not address the concerns of Job and his friends at all but instead 'answered' in a series of more than eighty rhetorical questions (questions with obvious answers). The questions are peppered with "Who", "Can you", "Have you ever", which were designed to emphasize the limits of human power, implying the limit of Job's power as well.

What is more, these questions highlighted the greatness of God's creation and His control of the universe. The Lord revealed His involvement in the creation and control of the animate and inanimate world; the stars and constellations; the netherworld; the natural world including light and darkness; rain, snow and the sea; and hail, clouds and storm. All these revealed Job's ignorance in contrast to God's knowledge and Job's finiteness in contrast to God's overwhelming majesty.



God's providential care of the animal world was also clearly stated. He feeds the animals and cares for their young. Thus, if He does that, surely He cares for humans made in His image.

God's creation is vast, diverse and mysterious, way beyond human control and yet easily within His control. In communicating this, God was teaching Job the deeper lessons about wisdom in a broken world. Surely, God is able to rule the world justly and lovingly, even in a broken world where things may seem to be out of control. Nevertheless, God is still sovereignly in complete control.

So does it make sense to accuse God of injustice? It seems that Job had been doing this. In reality, God's concerns in creation are wider than humans alone. The clearest example of this is when He makes rainfall where there are no humans (38:26-27). As creator, He is distinct from His creation but He is involved in freely caring for it. God's many references to creation are highly appropriate because by them He was addressing His ownership of the universe while at the same time refuting Job's accusation of deprivation. God did not actually deprive Job of anything, because He, as Creator, owns all that is in the universe. The founder is the owner; the Creator is the ruler.

In the face of all these, Job acknowledged that God is sovereign and admitted his own unworthiness (40:3-5). He sensed that he had already said enough and resigned to remaining silent (40:4b).

God went on to ask Job:

“Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself? Do you have an arm like God's, and can your voice thunder like his? Then adorn yourself with glory and splendour, and clothe yourself in honour and majesty. Unleash the fury of your wrath, look at every proud man and bring him low, look at every proud man and humble him, crush the wicked where they stand” (40:8-12).





What Job learned is that divinely ordained justice in the world is God's governance. Accusing God of injustice was presumptuous because God as ruler has a system of justice that exceeds what Job sensed in the human legal system. Since Job did not have the power to be judge, he did not have the right. Job's claim that he could run the universe better than God was simply a fiction. Job was told to drop the claim and hand the matter over completely to God more trustingly, less fretfully. This is the way of wisdom - to willingly, not begrudgingly, admit that God alone is God.

God then spoke of the behemoth (40:15-24) and the leviathan (41), usually considered as the hippopotamus and the crocodile. In the ancient East, these animals are symbols of cosmic power and chaos. God demonstrated to Job that he could not possibly control or subdue these creatures. Therefore Job had no right to challenge God. Since he thought that God was allowing chaos in his life and since he questioned what God was doing, Job was challenged to defeat these symbols of chaos. If he could not conquer and control these animals, he was in no position to discredit God, his Creator and Maker, for treating him unjustly. He could not possibly assume God's role and bring order into the moral realm.

Job learned that pride has no place before God. Even a crocodile looks down on the haughty (41:34), bringing fear to man's heart. How then could Job stand in defiance against God, the Maker of the crocodile?

Job gave his final reply to God in Job 42:2-6. It is clear that his reply was an act of worship, for he called God 'wonderful' (42:3). Job admitted that his demands had not taken into consideration the wonder of who God is. He also admitted that God has plans behind everything that happens, even if those plans are hidden to man. In this instance Job thought he knew how to run the world better than God until he appreciated the power and hidden wisdom of God.





Job bowed before God and let Him be who He is. He learned to serve God for Himself alone. Although God gave Job no explanation for what happened to him even after the test, it made it possible for Job to enter into a life of naked faith, to learn to love God for Himself alone. To withhold the full story from Job keeps him walking by faith, not by sight. He did not say in the end, “Now I see it all”. He never sees it all. He sees God (42:5) and that was all he needs. That is what we all really need, now and for all eternity.

The words of a hymn by William Cowper, a suffering servant, poetically capture this idea:

- 1 God moves in a mysterious way,
His wonders to perform:
He plants His footsteps in the sea
And rides upon the storm.
- 2 Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never-failing skill,
He treasures up His bright designs,
And works His sovereign will.
- 3 Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take:
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.
- 4 Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.
- 5 His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour.
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.
- 6 Blind unbelief is sure to err,
And scan His works in vain;
God is His own interpreter,
And He will make it plain.





Chapter 42:7-17

EPILOGUE

Job's three friends expected God to condemn Job for his wrong responses. Instead, God told the three friends that He was angry with them for not speaking what was right of Him like His servant Job. Job was an innocent sufferer, but his three friends self-justifying, legalistic retribution theology missed the whole point. They failed to truly help a suffering friend in need and were more keen to defend their theories than to discern the real situation. The Lord God told them to ask Job to pray for them. Then they were to offer a burnt sacrifice in repentance, lest divine judgment fall upon them. Job's willingness to pray for them revealed his righteousness and forgiving spirit.

Some of us may wonder why God was so affirming of Job. Is it not true that Job cursed the day he was born; he complained with bitterness and challenged God's wisdom in running the world; he even expressed doubts about God and His justice? But note that Job did not abandon his honesty. Indeed, he complained to God and he expressed his doubts to God. In this way he continued to address God, seeking God and an explanation for his sufferings. His sufferings did not drive him away from God; instead, they drove him to God. Job was in fact praying to God for vindication; he felt that only God could put things right.

The Bible reveals that God cares for the broken-hearted and the humble in spirit. In our difficult moments, in the darkest of night when there is no relief, remember that God is always there. Like Job, we must continue to seek Him, even complain to Him, for this is in fact an expression of faith. We must not lose heart and lose our faith in Him, even though we do not understand fully what is happening. God does know best and He always works for the good of those who put





their trust in Him (Romans 8:28). God's affirmation of Job revealed His wondrous grace and forgiveness, even though He noted the failures in the responses of Job. For He saw the heart of this righteous man.

And God restored Job's prosperity two-fold to indicate clearly that God does bless the righteous but He is not to be restricted by the retribution theology on every count. His wisdom is beyond our understanding and His justice is not to be measured by our measurement. In the case of Job, God blessed him in the physical realm and demonstrated His justice in this world. For some, such material prosperity will only come after death and resurrection in the new heavens and new earth. All the while, we remember that ultimate justice will be manifested at the final judgement by God through His Son.

Job lived on many years after this, but it was surely a different Job. It was a Job who saw God, encountered Him and was transformed by these experiences. Job's sufferings did not make him bitter. Rather, they refined him, humbled him and helped him to worship God from an entirely different perspective. The school of suffering can yield great lessons: we do not know who we really are until we are tested; we cannot fully empathise with others who are suffering unless we ourselves have suffered; and we do not really know how to trust God wholesomely until we are at the end of ourselves with nothing and no one else to depend upon.

"In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith - of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire - may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed" (1 Peter 1:6-7). May this be true of us; that our faith may be proved genuine. When we meet the Lord Jesus Christ, our faith will result in praise, glory and honour unto Him.





ADDITIONAL LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF JOB

LESSON 1

In the midst of his sufferings, his close friends misunderstood and accused him. He also felt that God had made him His enemy and target. So Job cried for vindication since he was not aware of any wrongs that he had committed to deserve such pain.

Many believers, feeling that they have suffered unjustly, also cry out for immediate justice.

IMMEDIATE JUSTICE?

Why is it that God does not hearken to their cries for immediate justice? We need to note that evil and sin are so deeply ingrained in the human heart after the fall that if Christ were to come in power to destroy evil everywhere He found it, He would have had to destroy us too. Our cries for immediate justice may mean that we also become a casualty in God's judgment.

Hence, God, in the person of Christ, went in weakness to the cross to pay for our sins so that someday He can come again to wipe out evil without having to judge all of us as well. At the cross, the requirement that evil be punished by death was met by the Lord Jesus who intervened in love to take our penalty; at the cross, evil was conquered by the supreme degree of love in the fulfilment of justice. God can then forgive our sins without compromising His justice. Jesus took the penalty we deserved so that we can be restored to a relationship of love with God.

Take note that if sin had to be punished immediately and the





penalty does not involve death or hell, immediate retribution would completely strip obedience of any meaning. Obedience would then be a response to an anticipated pleasure and disobedience would just be a desire for pain. The motive for obedience would be corrupted and the motive to avoid disobedience would just be free from punishment, pain and discomfort. Obedience will no longer be an expression of love for God and His desires; it will be contaminated with self-love and God does not want such a development in the lives of His people. We need to trust God to work out His love and wisdom in our lives in the ways He orders our lives, including times of sufferings and in His perfect timing.

LESSON 2

During his sufferings, Job came to a point when he felt that God was hedging him in and was very cruel to him. Some of us may feel the same way in our despair and conclude that God does not care at all for our plight. This is far from the truth.

God is a suffering God

The Scriptures reveal that God can sympathise with us because He, in Christ, experienced our weakness as well as our pain (Hebrews 2:18; 4:15). Isaiah 53 highlights that Christ Jesus carried our grief and our sorrows. Not only does God know what our sufferings are like; He experiences our sufferings. Surely we can appreciate the fact that God in His Son had first hand experience of sufferings. Such a God cannot be indifferent to our plight. Indeed, such a God can empathise with us and be fully trusted to carry us through our difficult moments with love and understanding.

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem; you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing” (Matthew 23:37).





Here we hear the Lord Jesus expressing His longing for the unrepentant Jews to turn back to Him so that He could restore them in His love but they were not willing. Even at the point when judgment was imminent, God in Jesus felt such great love and pain in His heart for His people. It was grievous to Him to punish them for their sins and rebellion even though they thoroughly deserved it. Seeing this, can we ever doubt that God does not care for us in our sufferings? Can we ever doubt that He does not feel for us?

In our sufferings, even when we do not understand the ‘whys’ and the ‘hows’, we need not conclude that God is far off and indifferent. Our grief and sorrows should drive us more into God and the resources in Him; instead of looking for relief, we should enter into a deeper experience of His presence and enabling to see the light even in the thick of darkness. Like the apostle Paul, we must learn *“to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need and I know what it is to have plenty...”* (Philippians 4:11(b)-12).

That does not mean that we do not look to God for deliverance; we must rest in Him to do what He knows is best for us and be content to experience that His grace is always sufficient for us even though the dawn has not arisen.

God is a sovereign God

The Scriptures teach that God is in full control of human history. Indeed, God works through our actions, but we are never compelled by God to do anything. Thus, we are responsible to face the consequences of our actions. Nonetheless, God works out His will perfectly through our willing action and choice.

The life of Joseph in the Bible illustrates this well. Joseph’s brothers were fully responsible for their evil acts towards Joseph. Yet God works through their negative wilful actions to bring about





good for Joseph and those around him. Joseph himself recognised this truth. For he said that God had sent him to Egypt to take a position of authority next to Pharaoh in order to save the lives of his people. But Joseph's journey to influence in Egypt was through much sufferings. He was sold by his brothers, put into prison through wrongful accusations, and forgotten by those whose dreams he interpreted. All this suffering was in one sense due to the evil choices of men; but from another perspective this hardship was part of God's plan. Thus, Joseph spoke rightly to his brothers, '*You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives*' (Genesis 50:20).

If we see the sovereignty of God clearly, his children can rest assured that He is in control even though adverse circumstances enter our lives and threaten our well-being. God, in His perfect love and wisdom, will see to it that in all things He works for the good of those who love Him, those who have been called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28).

His sovereignty means that very often, God does not give us exactly what we ask for. Instead, He gives us what we would have requested if we had known everything that He knows. This implies that our knowledge and wisdom are limited. We ought to trust the One who has all knowledge and wisdom. Like the saying of an old saint who shared that God does not always give us what seems necessary, but He gives us what we really need. And sometimes what we truly need can only be received in the midst of sufferings and adversity.

LESSON 3

We have seen that the book of Job belongs to the genre of wisdom literature in the Bible. It uses suffering as a platform for a debate to decide who possesses ultimate wisdom. In the conclusion, the answer is clearly God. Although the Accuser seeks to use





sufferings to cause God's people to forsake loyalty to God, the Lord God, in His wisdom, uses sufferings to work for the good of His people. Accordingly, He has worked time and again. Through the negative actions of individuals he accomplishes the transformation of His people to become like His Son. In the case of Job we saw in the end how he was transformed positively through his sufferings.

So God employs sufferings to connect us to the Lord Jesus Christ, effecting our union with Him. Hebrews 5:8 states that "Although He was a son, He learned obedience from what He suffered." Christ, as the perfect man, took on humanhood in His sufferings. We, as humans, take on Christhood in our suffering, in union with Him. This is perhaps what the Apostle Paul referred to in Philippians 3:10, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death."

Our sufferings as believers connect us to Christ. This connection with Christ makes our sufferings meaningful; it transforms our sufferings into something redemptive rather than destructive. The Apostle Paul understood that the connection or fellowship of sharing in Christ's sufferings will lead to knowing Him more fully and experiencing more of the power of His resurrection life. In that sense, 'death' leads to 'life' if the 'death' is in line with faithfulness to Christ and the gospel, and this 'life' is not just for the one who suffers in Christ but 'life' is also transmitted to others spiritually. This is the paradox of losing our lives for Jesus' sake and gaining true life in the process.

Suffering is also used by God as a wake-up call. It may not be discipline for something specific we have done wrong but it may be God's way to wake us up from our lethargy and complacency in our Christian lives. C. S. Lewis made the wise observation that God whispers in our pleasures but shouts in our pains. "Pain is His megaphone to rouse a dulled world". Believers may become as





insensitive as unbelievers to God's voice but it is very difficult to ignore God in the midst of sufferings.

LESSON 4

A great portion of the book of Job focuses on the dialogues between Job and his three friends. The interaction went on over three cycles. These three friends seemed to be among those known for their wisdom but we know that at the end of the book, they were rebuked by God for speaking wrongly about Him.

Notice that Eliphaz started off by basing his understanding upon a dream or a vision:-

“A word was secretly brought to me, my ears caught a whisper of it. Amid disquieting dreams in the night, when deep sleep falls on man, fear and trembling seized me and made all my bones shake. A spirit glided past my face, and the hair on my body stood on end. It stopped but I could not tell what it was. A form stood before my eyes and I heard a hushed voice” (Job 4:12-16).

As for Bildad, he referred to tradition as his basis to correct Job, *“Ask the former generations and find out what their fathers learned, for we were born only yesterday and know nothing, and our days on earth are but a shadow. Will they not instruct you and tell you? Will they not bring forth words from their understanding?” (Job 8:8-10).*

Zophar looked to ancient human wisdom to bring his case across to Job, *“Surely you know how it has been from of old, ever since man was placed on the earth” (Job 20:4).*

What is interesting is to find out that vision, experience, dream, tradition and even ancient human wisdom can be wrong in diagnosing a problem. In fact, in church history experience without the authority of





Scriptures has caused God's people to be led astray many a time, leading to sad consequences. Tradition which promoted unscriptural teachings and allowed corruption to seep into the Church was one main factor that led to the Reformation 500 years ago. One positive outcome was the affirmation that only Scriptures can claim the authority from God and every other teaching and tradition should be subject to the authority of the Bible. From the book of Job, we see that human wisdom, even ancient wisdom, is limited. Ultimate wisdom belongs to God alone.

J. C. Ryle brought home these truths very effectively and warned believers of the dangers which face the Church of God in this regard:

“The assaults of persecution from without have never done half as much harm to the Church as the rise of false doctrines within. False prophets and false teachers within the camp have done far more mischief in Christendom than all the bloody persecutions of the emperors of Rome. The sword of the foe has never done such damage to the cause of truth as the tongue and the pen. Let us no more trifle with a little false doctrine than we would trifle with a little immorality, or a little lie. Once admit it into our hearts, and we never know how far it may lead us astray. The beginning of departure from the pure truth is like the letting out of waters - first a drop, and at last a torrent” (Day by Day with J. C. Ryle - November 14 - edited by Eric Russell).

The problem of false teachings continues to plague the Church today. We must call to mind the words of the Lord Jesus, *‘Beware of false prophets’* (Matthew 7:15). Remember also the advice of the Apostle Paul and the Apostle John, *‘Test everything’* and *‘Test the spirits to see whether they are from God’* (1 Thessalonians 5:21; 1 John 4:1).

More from J. C. Ryle:

“The amount of evil which unsound religious teaching has brought on the Church in every age is incalculable. The loss of souls





which it has occasioned is fearful to contemplate. A teacher who does not know the way to heaven himself is not likely to lead the hearers to heaven. The man who hears such a teacher runs a fearful risk himself of being lost eternally. *'If the blind lead the blind both must fall into the ditch'* (Luke 6:39). We must not believe things merely because ministers say them. We must not suppose, as a matter of course, that ministers can make no mistakes...With the Bible in our hands, and the promise of guidance from the Holy Spirit to all who seek it, we shall be without excuse if our souls are led astray. The blindness of ministers is no excuse for the darkness of people" (Day by Day with J. C. Ryle - November 18 - edited by Eric Russell).

Let us soberly evaluate the warnings and the dangers that false teachings bring. Let us not take lightly what have been shared. Some sincere teachers may even be led astray by visions, experiences, tradition and human wisdom. Remember that the consequences may be eternal damnation if we allow the evil one to distort the gospel through such individuals. The Bereans should be our model (Acts 17:11). We must test all teachings, traditions, visions, etc. by the clear teaching in the Bible.



SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

“Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him” (Hebrews 5:8).

This verse does not indicate that Jesus was not obedient before His sufferings. In fact He was always obedient to His father as the Son and He always did what was pleasing to the Father (John 8:29). Rather, “‘learned obedience’ means that the Son arrived at a new stage of experience, having passed through the school of suffering” (NIVAC Hebrews by George Guthrie).

Indeed, His sufferings demonstrated His obedience to the Father. He was prepared to suffer and He suffered tremendously to obediently do the will of the Father. This is echoed in His statement in the garden of Gethsemane, *‘My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will’* (Matthew 26:39). The Father’s call to Jesus required obedience all the way to the cross, where Jesus completed the task the Father had assigned Him.

We see that the path of obedience to God involves sufferings; as disciples of the Lord Jesus who follow Him and His ways, this is also true for our lives. We must be prepared for sufferings and not turn back in sufferings if we desire to do the will of God in our lives.

In the case of Jesus, His obedience to the Father, in the midst of intense sufferings, was complete and perfected.

We know that the entire gospel consists mainly in the death and resurrection of Christ. However, John Calvin reminds us that “Christ’s saving work does not begin at the cross. His incarnation and thirty-plus years are not merely a prerequisite for his atoning death. Assuming our humanity and fulfilling all righteousness in his active obedience are





essential to our redemption. In short, from the time when he took on the form of a servant, he began to pay the price of liberation in order to redeem us” (Calvin on the Christian Life by Michael Horton).

Hebrews 9:14 reveals that Christ offered himself unblemished to God. His was the perfect, unblemished sacrifice, not tainted with sin and unrighteousness. Only a perfect unblemished sacrifice could cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, and only such a sacrifice could redeem us to serve the living God. Notice that Christ’s perfect obedience to the Father and His perfect sacrifice as a penal substitution for us, dying for us, was accomplished through much suffering and pain.

Suffering is part and parcel of the life of a disciple of Christ. It was present in the life of the Master, the Lord Jesus, when He was on earth. As Paul declared, “*For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ, not only to believe on Him, but also to suffer for Him*” (Philippians 1:29), we need to acknowledge that sufferings are to be expected in the lives of believers and the path of faithfulness to God is invariably lined with sufferings.



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Understanding Suffering, Evil and the Unfathomable Wisdom of God

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