

Learning From Job: How We Should Think About Suffering

By Marco Scouvert



“Just as sure as sparks fly upward, likewise man is born for trouble” (Job 5:7). All of us are either coming out of a trial, in the midst of a trial, or will soon be going into a trial. When suffering comes, where will we find the strength to endure without sinning? More than that, how can we respond in a way that pleases God and magnifies the worth of Jesus in the midst of difficulty or loss?

If we desire to respond rightly in our afflictions, we first need to think correctly about them. Here are three observations from Job’s suffering.

1. God’s people are not spared from all suffering. Some teachers confidently assert that it is never God’s will for his children to suffer. Contrary to this, Jesus says, “in the world you will have tribulation” (John 16:33). Becoming a Christian does not exempt us from suffering. We still live in a fallen body and world. If anything, our liability to afflictions increases because we have become the sworn enemy of the devil and unbelievers.

Job was a “believer” in God. As the Lord spoke to Satan, he referred to Job as his personal servant (1:8). God declared that Job was his loyal subject who trusted in and followed him. In that spirit, Job offered sacrifices on behalf of his children (and presumably himself) for the sake of their sins (1:5). He acknowledged his offenses before God and was looking to him by faith to forgive the guilt of his sins. And yet, Job suffered tremendously.

As a follower of Jesus, when suffering enters our lives, we should not think of it as the unexpected drop in of a stranger but rather one of many visits from an acquaintance we expect to meet often in life (cf. 1 Peter 4:12). If we let that truth sink into our hearts and call it to mind when affliction comes, it will help to protect us from being destabilized by our difficulties and overtaken by confusion and doubt.

2. When God’s people suffer, it is not necessarily their fault. Some people believe that every time a Christian suffers, it is because he is failing to exercise faith in God’s promises to protect, heal, or provide. Or the person is guilty of some sin or neglect

in the areas of prayer, fasting, or tithing. I once spoke to a man who was struggling financially and whose wife was not becoming pregnant. He told me that such hardships in a believer’s life were due to failure to abide by one or more of God’s “kingdom principles” (even though he was unable to tell me which one they had neglected).

At times, Christians undergo affliction because of God’s fatherly correction to chasten us for certain sins we commit or hold onto for a season. But that is not always the case. In the opening two chapters of the book, Job is described three times as “blameless, upright, fearing God, and turning away from evil” (1:1, 1:8, 2:3). Job made it his ambition to please God. In all areas of his life, he rejected evil and sought to do what was right before him. Though he was not perfect, he was above reproach. In fact, he may have been the godliest man on earth at that time (1:8). Nevertheless, Job was sorely afflicted.

When you encounter trials, it is worth pausing to see if it may be corrective discipline from the Lord. If so, then thank God for his loving care and repent where necessary. But be careful not to wrongly assume that you have failed or done something wrong. Such thinking can lead you into unproductive introspection and heap an unnecessary weight of guilt on you, leaving you with discouragement and despair.

3. God’s people never suffer in a unique way. When we are afflicted, we sometimes believe the lie that we are undergoing either a kind or a degree of suffering that no one else has ever experienced. Even if we can think of people who have similarly lost a spouse or gone through cancer, we argue that it isn’t exactly the same as our case. Such thinking robs us of the encouragement that comes from realizing that others have persevered through the same trials with God’s help. In this state of mind, we may lose hope that we’ll ever be able to endure our difficulties.

Wave after wave of pain crashed upon Job, threatening to drown him. On the same day, Job’s wealth as well as his ten children were taken from him (1:13-19). Shortly thereafter he received miserable sores that covered him from head to toe (2:7-8) and lost the support of his wife (2:9). Satan’s design was for Job to curse God in bitterness (1:11, 2:5). Job refused, and chose instead to bow before the sovereign will of God and bless him (1:20-22, 2:10)! In the end, though he was not perfect, we are told that Job patiently endured his prolonged trial (James 5:11).

Be encouraged. If Job persevered through his trials by God’s grace, so can you. Your heavenly Father is faithful: he will enable you to endure whatever suffering you encounter (1 Corinthians 10:13). Remember that Jesus, your high priest, is not only able to sympathize with your weaknesses and temptations, but also to give you the merciful help that you need. Therefore, when you are tempted in the midst of suffering, go to Christ by prayer and receive his powerful grace (Hebrews 4:15-16).