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CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

WISDOM LITERATURE

UNIT 04: JOB – 2

MESSAGE OF THE BOOK:

The problem addressed by the book of Job is a timeless one that lies at the heart of human experience: Why do the innocent suffer? Job's intense suffering and powerful response were honored in the Bible (James 5:11) and have become proverbial in everyday speech, but on its surface, the book is puzzling as it seems to show that God allowed "the Satan" to destroy Job's family, take away his possessions, and afflict him with physical harm – simply to show or to test how righteous Job was. So the book of Job deals with the theological concept of *retribution* according to which the righteous prosper but the wicked suffer, as well as *theodicy*, the explanation of why a good God would allow evil and unjust things to occur. But to fully grasp the message of Job, we must look at what the book says in the correct contexts.

TRIALS WITHIN TRIALS: THE LEGAL BASIS OF JOB

While Job was undergoing physical trials and tribulations, he also underwent trials of another type – legal trials – and to understand the book of Job we must first realize that the work is written from this legal perspective. Legal language is used throughout the book, but consider some examples from chapter 9, where Hebrew juridical terminology begins to be used constantly. Job speaks about answering a legal summons (9:16), about a judge (9:15), about justice (9:19), of being innocent (9:20), of being declared or proven guilty (9:20), of a legal complaint or plea (9:27), of a legal hearing (9:16), of answering a legal charge (9:32), in court (9:32), and of a legal arbitrator or mediator (9:33), to name just a few of the terms used. But the legal basis of the book of Job goes far beyond simply using legal terms.

The major sections of the book's core actually represent a series of interlocking trials in which Job's friends accuse Job of sin and Job defends himself. Job also brings counter accusations of misjudgment against his friends and, more importantly, as the story develops he also accuses God of unfairness and failure to bring about justice. In chapter 9 Job begins to explore the possibility of entering into legal proceedings with God – in order to force formal recognition of his innocence: "He is not a mere mortal like me that I might answer him, that we might confront each other in court. If only there were someone to mediate between us, someone to bring us together" (9:32-33). As the story develops further, in some translations (see Note 1) Job expresses faith that there is someone who could act as a mediator between himself and God: "Even now my witness is in heaven; my advocate is on high. My intercessor is my friend as my eyes pour out tears to God; on behalf of a man he pleads with God as one pleads for a friend" (16:19-21). Some verses, such as this one, may be unsure in their exact meaning, but in most of the book of Job the legal theme of the story is clear. This fact is important in understanding the story as it shows the "speeches" of Job and his friends have legal implications, and this is especially true of the many questions the actors put forward.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS IN JOB

The book of Job has such a powerful and memorable storyline that it is possible to focus on the story and miss its point. At its heart, Job is a book of questions, but sometimes we do not see the questions for the story. When we think of the book of Job, we usually think of the narrative stream of events: righteous Job; God giving the Satan permission to afflict him; Job's troubles; his discussions with his friends; God speaking to Job; and finally, Job's restoration. We see this story-stream, but we do not always focus on the questions within the stream. Yet when we look closely at the questions in Job, we can see the underlying lesson of the book much better because they actually provide the structural "skeleton" of the story's narrative, rather than the other way around.

Once the stage is set, the book of Job begins with questions: "Where have you come from?" (1:7); "Have you considered my servant Job?" (1:8); "Does Job fear God for nothing?" (1:9); "Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has?" (1:10). These inquiries quickly propel us into the story proper, and it is here that Job begins to ask an ongoing string of questions that form the heart of the story. Notice just some of these:

"Why did I not perish at birth, and die as I came from the womb?" (3:11)

"Why is light given to those in misery, and life to the bitter of soul?" (3:20)

"Why do you hide your face and consider me your enemy?" (13:24)

"Why do the wicked live on, growing old and increasing in power?" (21:7)

When we put Job's questions together in this way, we immediately see a clear pattern: Job asks "Why?" over and over again. In the course of the book Job asks this same question many times as he grapples with his situation. At the heart of Job's repeatedly asking "Why?" is the central issue of why God allows him to suffer undeservedly – a question explicitly stated in his words: "I will say to God, Do not condemn me; let me know why you contend against me" (10:2 ESV).

Throughout the central part of the book, Job's friends also ask questions – all of which are aimed at Job himself. But, one after another, Job – rightly – discounts the speeches of the three friends and returns to his unanswered questions of "Why?" Finally, at the climax of the story, God himself steps into the scene with questions of his own – introduced with the words "Brace yourself like a man and I will question you and you shall answer me" (38:3, 40:7). Throughout four full chapters God then pummels Job with some seventy questions of his own (chapters 38-41). When we look carefully at God's questions, we see a pattern, also. God does not ask "Why?" Instead, God proceeds to ask Job "Where?" "When" "What?" "How?" "Which?" and "Who?" along with questions such as "Can you...?" "Have you?" "Did you?"

But God is not really asking Job for answers – he does not give him the opportunity to try to reply. God asks rhetorical questions he knows Job cannot answer. But God's questions make it clear that Job doesn't know the when, where, what, how, and other aspects of God's works. The clear point of God asking Job everything but "Why?" is as a rebuke to Job: why does he question why God does what he does and allows what he allows, when Job clearly does not understand any of the aspects of God's works regarding the inanimate and animate elements of creation. In other words, God asks Job: Why question the "Why?" of my will when you cannot comprehend the "How" and any of the other aspects of what I choose to do? That is why, when God has finished questioning Job, the patriarch exclaims:

You asked, 'Who is this that obscures my plans without knowledge?' Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. (Job 42:3)

Job came to realize that if he was not qualified in any way to comprehend the basic aspects of God's creation and sustaining of all there is, then he certainly was not qualified to pass judgment on how God directs the events of human lives or allows what he does allow.

This was Job's epiphany, his moment of understanding at the conclusion of the book's dialog when he says to God: "You said, 'Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me.' My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes" (42:4-6). Job realized that although he had not done wrong, he had no reason to question God's wisdom and judgment in allowing his suffering.

LESSONS FROM JOB

The book of Job contains many lessons that we can learn regarding suffering – whether it is our own or that of those we try to help. Consider a few of those lessons:

1. Seeing the Suffering

The opening of the book of Job paints a stirring picture of the friends who hear about Job's situation and act upon it. They do not simply stay at home and pray for Job, but communicate, coordinate, and set out to help him. Job reminds us all of the depth of suffering that is in the world, and Job's friends, despite their faults, remind us that seeing, acknowledging, and trying to help the suffering is the responsibility of all of us. In the modern world we are often protected from the sight of suffering and it is easy to ignore it, but, as the medical missionary Albert Schweitzer wrote, we should all "Think occasionally of the suffering of which you spare yourself the sight." In this sense, Job is not just a book about someone who suffered, it is a book about everyone who suffers greatly and the opportunities we have to help them.

2. Love and Suffering

Although the friendship and love of others cannot remove or completely alleviate the suffering that many experience in life, the book of Job shows that concern – when expressed properly – can certainly be a great help (16:5). While Job's wife is often viewed in a negative way and may not have had great hope (see Note 2), she nevertheless showed her love and concern by her presence. Likewise, Job's three friends – despite their lack of theological understanding – showed their loving support by traveling a great distance to come to Job, and then staying with him for days in the midst of his misery. But it is clear that Job's friends often did not speak as comfortingly as they might have done (for example, regarding the children Job had just lost – 5:4; 8:4; 20:10; 21:19). The book of Job challenges us to recognize that love helps those who are suffering only when it is done right.

3. Questioning God

There are times when it seems that Job is almost being presumptuous in his questioning of God's ways, yet the Bible shows that God accepts and even encourages our respectful questioning. We see this clearly in the lives of Abraham: "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" (Genesis 18:25 ESV) and Moses: "why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand?" (Exodus 32:11) – the two greatest figures of the Old Testament. Job also shows us that the follower of God must speak what he or she believes to be the truth, even if it means humbly challenging God, and that faith need not, and should not, be blind. God expects and wants those who come to know him to think about what they learn and understand and to question when things do not seem to fit what they believe.

Although Job may have sincerely questioned God and his purposes, he remained loyal to God throughout his suffering. Sometimes Job's exasperation at his circumstances might seem to have overwhelmed his faith, but time and again he reaffirmed his essential trust, and loyalty, to God (1:20-21; 13:15; 19:25; etc.). The lesson we need to learn is that we can question and still trust God and be loyal to him.

4. *The Insufficiency of Human Wisdom*

Job's friends are older, experienced, and wise individuals, yet as we read the book of Job we see that the speeches of the friends get shorter and shorter, and finally die out completely. The final speech of Bildad (chapter 25) is only six verses long, and Zophar, who we expect to give a third speech, does not even try. Much of what Job and his friends say is true, but none of his friends can explain Job's situation with human wisdom. Even Job exclaims "Where can wisdom be found?" (28:12) and concludes that it has been hidden (28:21). But as the book of Job moves toward its conclusion, the man Elihu speaks up because he was "very angry with Job for justifying himself rather than God" and "He was also angry with the three friends, because they had found no way to refute Job, and yet had condemned him" (32:2-3). Elihu rejects both the conclusions of Job and also those of his friends. He specifically says: "Hear my words, you wise men; listen to me, you men of learning" (34:2) and turns his hearers repeatedly toward the wisdom of God (35:11; 38:36-37; 39:17, 26; etc.). Elihu reminds us that human wisdom does not see God's divine plan and so it does not see the purposes of suffering.

5. *The Lesson Job Learned*

To understand Job's error, we must notice that Elihu – speaking in introduction to God's appearance – does not condemn Job's behavior, but his mistaken words: "But you have said in my hearing – I heard the very words – 'I am pure, I have done no wrong; I am clean and free from sin. Yet God has found fault with me; he considers me his enemy' ...But I tell you, in this you are not right" (33:8-12). Elihu does not reproach Job for saying he was innocent (which was true), but for saying that God was not right. When God intervenes, he shows what Elihu said to be true, asking Job: "Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself?" (40:8), and Job repents not for any evil he had done, but for the mistaken things he had said regarding God: "Surely I spoke of things I did not understand" (42:3).

6. *Suffering Is More than Suffering*

The greatest lesson of the book of Job is that suffering cannot always be explained as the result of wrongdoing – as was well summarized by Augustine when he wrote that "God had one son on earth without sin, but never one without suffering." Hebrews 5:8 affirms that even the perfect Son of God "learned obedience from what he suffered." Job shows us that the righteous may likewise sometimes suffer in order to learn things only suffering will teach them – as David affirmed: "It was good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn thy statutes" (Psalm 119:71 ESV), and the New Testament concurs (Hebrews 12:10-11; James 1:2-4; 1 Peter 1:6-7; etc.).

So in the book of Job we see that suffering may sometimes be allowed to help produce the righteous character God wants to build in our lives, and this is the point made by Elihu, who tells us that suffering is one of the ways God speaks to us: "those who suffer he delivers in their suffering; he speaks to them in their affliction" (Job 36:15). Understanding this fact can be tremendously encouraging to those who suffer – to know that our pain may serve to help us learn to become more like God and to become better able to help others in their suffering. Job teaches us that if we believe that God is wise, we can trust him to be just. This is the hope we can all have in suffering – hope expressed by Job himself: "But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold" (23:10).

* Note 1: The translation of Job 16:20, “my intercessor is my friend,” is found in recent versions of the Bible such as the NIV and NET. Older translations usually give a different meaning to this phrase: “My friends scorn me; My eye pours out tears to God” (ESV, etc.). This difference is because the Hebrew word *melis* in this verse seems to be related to the word for “scorner,” but in the Wisdom Literature especially, the word can mean “mediator” (as in 33:23 ESV). Recent versions such as the NIV and NET choose the meaning “mediator” because this goes better with the passage in which the verse is found. That Job should understand that he had a mediator in heaven might seem advanced for the Old Testament, yet it is no more so than the concepts of the divine redeemer and the resurrection that Job also understood: “I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God” (Job 19:25-26).

* Note 2: The negative view of Job’s wife is based entirely on her statement “Curse God and die” (2:9), but the Hebrew of this verse is literally “Bless God and die.” Most translators presume this is a circumlocution – saying something less offensive than what is actually meant – but Jewish tradition indicates that there is a long history of the idea of blessing God when one is ready to die (Psalm 16:9-11, etc.), so the statement may not have been intended negatively.

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REVIEW AND REFLECTION: (complete in your notebook)

Meaning and Message

1. What does the introduction to the book of Job show about the limitations God places on the suffering that he allows?
2. What is the legal “charge” that Job brings against God?
3. What is the difference between the questions Job asks throughout the book of Job and the questions asked by God at the conclusion of the story?
4. Think about the implications of the fact that “After Job had prayed for his friends, the LORD restored his fortunes” (42:10).

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