

Suffering in Job: Possible Insights

The Book of Job is concerned with the awful things that God sometimes lets happen to people. That issue can raise the question of what the relationship between us and God is based on, and then the question of whether we can understand how God runs the world. Further, the story is concerned with how we react to suffering and how we may help other people do so.

The way it proceeds is by offering us a number of answers to its question(s), all of which have some truth to them but which need to be applied with discernment to different situations. The basic problem with Job's friends is their inability to do so.

(1) The suffering is a test. The Introduction to the book raises the question of whether the relationship between God and Job is a genuine personal one or a more contractual one. Job's troubles come to him to establish that God is right; it is personal not contractual. Setting up this answer involves hypothesizing Job as someone who is as near as you could get to a perfect human being. The drama also depends on the role of the being who is called Satan in most English translations, but this translation gives a misleading impression (see at #119). The word *satan* is an ordinary (if rather poetic) Hebrew word meaning "adversary," with legal or military connotations. "The Adversary" is here a member of God's cabinet whose responsibility is to make sure that people don't get away with things that they shouldn't get away with (a role that recognizes that God has a hard time being tough with people, so needs to be persuaded to do so when it is appropriate). God is inclined to trust people; the Adversary's responsibility is to ask sharp questions. There's thus some overlap with Satan with a big S but not total identity, though a significant link is that neither have too much power - they have only as much rope as God allows them. So Job's suffering comes as a test of the genuineness of his relationship with God. The idea that suffering is a test recurs in the Bible; Jesus is tested by the Devil (etymologically, that word, too, means "false accuser"). It's important to the test's reality that God doesn't know how it will turn out. So answer #1 to the question about suffering is that suffering comes to vindicate our relationship with God; that relationship is not based on what we can get out of it.

(2) Suffering comes as a consequence of our personal human sinfulness. Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar affirm the biblical insight that the relationship between people and God is based on people living the right kind of life: God honors those who honor God and treats with contempt people who treat God with contempt (1 Sam 2:30). Or as Jesus assumes, a man may get ill because of wrong he has done, so that he needs forgiveness and not merely healing (Mk 2:5; cf. 1 Cor 11:29-32). So answer #2 to the question about suffering is that it comes as a result of our personal wrongdoing. This insight is the kind that appears in Proverbs, a generalization that can be mistakenly turned into a hard-edged rule. Job's three friends treat it thus, laboring their point laboriously when they can no longer keep silent. They assume Job's troubles show he must have failed in his relationship with God and with life. The problem with the friends is thus not that their theological theory is wholly wrong but that it is irrelevant to this particular case. Truth is more complicated than they think. Their further great contribution to the book is to embody the danger that a sufferer's friends think they need to have answers, that the sufferer needs answers, and that one needs to be able to defend God against any charge of unfairness. Ironically, people who study the book may hope then to have the answer to its problem, which they can then share with sufferers, and thereby repeat the friends' mistake.

In the course of the debate between the friends and Job, there comes his declaration that he knows that his redeemer lives and that he will in due course see God (19:25). George Frideric Handel gave these words a key place in his famous choral work *The Messiah*. For Job himself, they form another declaration that, one way or another, Job will surely get the chance to confront God and have his commitment to God vindicated. Job is not looking for someone to redeem him from sin. He needs someone to vindicate him from his friend's accusations.

(3) Suffering challenges us to insist on facing God with the facts. Job knows that there are none of the wrongs in his life that his friends hypothesize. He acknowledges that he sins, like everyone. But he knows that his suffering is out of proportion to his sin. He therefore wants the opportunity to meet up with God in order to argue his case, so that God will recognize his integrity. At present, and until he can do so, the relationship between him and God is an enigma. The troubles are inexplicable. Job's great contribution to the book is to model a steadfastness in insisting on facing God with the facts. Answer #3 is thus that we react to suffering by insisting on

its painfulness and by protesting about it to God in the conviction that God is really there even if not behaving in the way that we know we have reason to expect. One way of seeing the book is as a gargantuan protest psalm. Related to answer #3 is the good response of Job's friends when they simply weep for Job and sit there with him in his pain, the best form of pastoral care they ever exercise.

(4) Suffering is designed to encourage us to grow spiritually. Elihu urges Job to see his troubles as designed to encourage him to grow spiritually. A relationship with God is based on humble submission to God; suffering encourages that submission. There are overlaps between Elihu's address and Yahweh's eventual address, and in a way Elihu thus prepares the way for Yahweh. Whereas the first three friends are censured at the close of the book, God does not condemn Elihu. Answer #4 recurs in Christian spirituality and it is the one often offered by Christians who are more enlightened than Job's three friends. It may prepare the way for God's answer but it is not God's answer.

(5) There is no answer to the question about suffering even when there is one. When Yahweh eventually appears, initially it is to confront Job not to vindicate him. Yahweh takes Job on a tour of the created world to show how much of it does not circulate around human need. It exists in its own right. There was nothing wrong in principle with Job's protesting to Yahweh about the way he has been treated, like the Psalms. His problem lies in his having come to speak as if he is the center of the world (as readers, we know that in this story there is something bigger afoot than factors involved in one individual's relationship with God). In his second address, Yahweh moves on to the question whether Job could make a better job of running the world and putting down evil than God makes. God's capacity to control Behemoth and Leviathan comes into focus. These two monsters are more like equivalents of Satan than the Adversary is. They are embodiments of power asserted against God, but embodiments that God has under control. Job's job is to accept his troubles on the basis of his relationship with God and on the basis of acceptance of limits and trust in God. A feature of Yahweh's addresses is that he does not tell Job about the background to his suffering, which we know about from chapters 1–2. The most delicious fact about the Book of Job is that there is an answer to the question of why Job suffers, but he is never given it. So answer #5 is that there is no answer even when there is one. Job therefore has to live with the experience the same way as many others, trusting God (as one who can control the forces of chaos, Behemoth and Leviathan) and letting God be God even when he cannot understand God. It is because Job expects that the world and revelation should revolve around him that he is rebuked.

(6) Everything will turn out happily at the end, not least for Job's daughters, who get named and who receive a share in Job's inheritance (both unusual features of the OT). The book's ending constitutes the vindication Job has looked for. The troubles are over. The relationship is genuine. The ending involves an irony. In a sense the friends are right after all. God honors the one who honors God. Of course not every sufferer's story ends in this "they all lived happily ever after" way; but the picture in this sufferer's story embodies that promise of God's faithfulness. Answer #6, that everything will turn out happily at the end, is unrealistic in earthly terms but it makes an important statement about the way God surely will make things turn out all right in the End. The most significant difference that Jesus makes to the Book of Job is that his resurrection gives firmer grounds for this expectation.

-John Goldingay, Fuller Seminary OT 501