

## **Job: Hope Returns**

**Job 42**

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And they all lived happily ever after...

Unexpected as it is, the Book of Job really does end this way. Gone are the days of darkness and gloom. Spring has arrived. God's favor returns. His face shines on Job once more. Are the memories of Job's pain erased? No! But, they are built upon so as to make the past a little less painful than it has been.

Time heals, they say. Actually, it isn't time so much as God's presence that heals. Knowing that He is there, he's *here!*, makes all the difference.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil, for You are with me...(Psa 23:4)

God is speaking to Job, at last! And yes, the lessons Job has been learning have been painful, and bewildering. But at least God is present! The silence has been deafening, but the voice of the Lord has brought a calm and serenity to the situation. God may well be angry with Job's friends, because they "have not spoken of Me what is right" (42:7,8 twice). But not with Job. There is a relationship that Job has with God that is summed up in the phrase "My servant" (42:7-8, four times; c.f. 1:8). It is an expression that the Scriptures use of men like Moses and David (Numb 12:7; 2 Sam 7:5). It is also the way God speaks about Jesus in the Servant Songs of Isaiah (Isa 42:1; 52:13; 53:11). It is almost as though God is singling Job out and saying to him, "you are special to Me!"

God's grace always does that! It singles us out and confers upon us favor that we do not expect or deserve. "The LORD made [Job] prosperous again..." (42:10). *Amazing grace...!*

### **But what about those lessons? What exactly did Job learn?**

Trials may come when we least expect them. They often come unannounced and without anticipation. Things may be fine one day and terrible the next. "Accidents"

happen without a moment's pre-vision. We are rarely given an opportunity to prepare ourselves for what may lie ahead.

There is no limit to the severity of a trial we may be asked to endure. There are no areas of life to which we are exempt by virtue of being a child of God. We cannot say of a particular hurt, "A Christian would never experience that!" Aids, the loss of a family member through suicide, multiple deformity, paraplegia, psychosis... we are exempt from none of these simply because we are believers.

We can never say about a trial, "God isn't in this!" Such analysis is out of joint. It belittles God's sovereignty, reducing Him to an "extra" in the unfolding of our lives. If God isn't sovereign, then He isn't God! Here, in the suffering of Job, God is just as much "at work" as anywhere else in Job's life. The conclusion to the Book of Job speaks of family members and friends, consoling Job "over all the trouble the LORD had brought upon him" (42:11). When bad things happen, God is right there in the very center of things.

Satan is more malevolent, more cunning, more petulant than we ever think. Hard as it is to think of a creature who is "pure evil," Satan is one. There are no limits to his schemes. His aim is to bring as much dishonor to God and those who belong to God as he can. His unimaginable malice, fury and cruelty against everything that is God's takes a variety of forms, but principally, he is cunning, often beyond our capacity to discern. He makes evil appear as good and good as evil, twisting everything in his mind and ours (2 Cor 11:14). Not taking him seriously can be our downfall. He is never happier than when he is ignored, for it is then that we often mistake his work for God's. When we blame God for actions that are Satan's, he is ecstatic.

Our best friends may prove to be a disappointment when things get really tough. Job's friends had proved fatally flawed in their counseling technique. They made categorical errors of fact and judgment. Their insistence that suffering is always divine punishment was both annoying and erroneous. Though Job lapsed in response to their insensitive assertions, their remarks were no less wrong.

Additionally, to suggest that all suffering is the direct consequence of a particular sin on our part is unwise, unhelpful, and incorrect. Instant retribution is true on occasions, in that sometimes God will judge sin straight away. But it was not so in this case.

Some trials do not go away quickly. Prayer is always the first resort. But sometimes, prayer will not remove the trial. Just as Paul had to learn to live with a thorn in the flesh, that submission did not come to him quickly (2 Cor 12:7-10). It came following his instinctive desire for its removal. Much needless pain is added whenever we suggest that it is the essence of saintliness to acquiesce to pain without any reluctance on our part. Job's initial responses in chapters 1 and 2 are breathtaking, but we are also to learn that his later questioning is not

necessarily something about which God disapproves. Job erred, it is true. But his error was not in the fact that he had trouble accepting the future as he saw it. Jesus teaches us in the Garden of Gethsemane that it is part of the human psyche to shrink from what appears painful and debilitating.

And some trials do not go away at all. The loss of Job's children was something Job would live with for the rest of his life. The pain grew less as time passed, and as God's grace enabled him to focus on other things; but, it is bad counseling, and poor pastoral care, to make light of the pain of personal bereavement. Christians grieve too!

Providence is always purposive. It is always intelligent rather than whimsical. There is a reason for everything, *everything!* We may not be able to detect what that reason is; in fact, more often than not, the purpose may be incomprehensible to us. It may be like the hippopotamus! The reason for its existence may be beyond our capacity to discern, But it is not beyond God's. However mysterious things may be to us, they are not so to God. Even if God chose to disclose that purpose, it is doubtful that we could ever understand it. But it is not important that we understand it; it is only important that He does.

The purposes of God in suffering are designed specifically for each individual. God treated Job severely because he wanted Job to be more useful for Him. After all, we still talk about Job! And study his life! Those whom God intends to use most significantly, He often treats with particular care. The training for those who are to be placed in the front line of battle is all the more intensive and painstaking. It is not necessarily a pronounced perverseness that is the reason why some battle with hardships all of their lives; rather, it is because God has intentions for special service which will require skills learned in battle. Those who are called to follow the King most closely need not wonder if they, too, become targets for the enemy's fire. Pain thus becomes a training ground for further usefulness.

Trials are dangerous times for our souls. Job has said things which he ought never to have said. He has discredited God's justice (Job 40:8). He has spoken words "without knowledge" (Job 38:2). Trials, as the book of Hebrews reminds, can sometimes embitter (Heb. 12:15). Trials do not contain within themselves the guarantee of spiritual benefit. Our response to them is crucial. Watchfulness and prayerfulness are the key to ensuring a good outcome. Of the three crosses at Calvary, one atoned, another sanctified, and just as surely, the third hardened. Nor was Job's good response initially a guarantee against future lapses. Some sins take time to root. Constant vigilance is required.

These are some of the lessons that Job has unfolded for us. One lesson, however, remains. It is the one recounted in the beautiful tale that brings this book to a close. It would be difficult to think of a better ending than this one. Job is not only restored to his former prosperity; he is given "twice as much as he had

before" (42:10). There are pictures of family gatherings, friends who gather for a meal, gifts and kind words spoken by those who love him (42:11). His livestock s sheep, camels, oxen, donkeyss are numbered as double what he had possessed before the trial (42:12; cf. 1:3).

And children! Seven sons and three girls. The girls names are delightful, reflecting something of the joy they must have brought him: *Jemimah* meaning "a dove," *Keziah* meaning "cinnamon," and *Keren-Happuch* meaning "container of antimony" s a highly prized eye shadow (42:14).

Can't you imagine Job pouring out his love for these children? Did that mean he had forgotten all about his past? No, of course not. Pain like that does not simply vanish. But good things can come and help refocus and restore. Spring arrives.

As Joni Eareckson Tada puts it:

God's pruning shears seem merciless. Nothing escapes the cutting edge of His will. Not the blossom of youth, not the bloom of good health, not the fruit of prosperity, not the sturdy, growing family. None of these fall outside the pruning effects of God's purposes. But spring comes, doesn't it? Much to our amazement, it even came to Job. A spring of such fragrance and beauty that his long, bitter winter must have seemed like a bad dream... Hope returns. New life pokes up from the dead stump. Joy reappears...ever so slowly, almost shyly, and not all at once. But it comes. Fresh new grace enables us to endure. Bright, hopeful promises offer a strong trellis to which we can cling. The sweet fragrance of the Holy Spirit blows across our lives, waters us with His word, and encourages us to reach for all the good things God has in store for us. In God's order, winter always gives way to spring. The iron grip of January yields to the sunshine of His love. If not now, then soon. Spring will not tarry. New life is on the way. (1)

The trouble with some pains is that they stick to us with super-glue. We find ourselves unable to get beyond the pain. We seem stuck, as it were, crippled by its tortuous character. In our western cultures, despite the trappings of solidarity, the grieving process, like so much else, takes place in seclusion. Days when folk appear happy and content are masks for tortured hours spent alone with one's thoughts (nightmares!), trapped by something that will not let us go. The pitfalls have been noted: a fixation on the events that have occurred, reliving the episode over and over so that it takes on a life of its own. Then comes depression, the thought that we can never be happy again, that life is permanently scared from now on and nothing can change that state of affairs. Then comes the most serious condition of all, perhaps. The internalization of grief. As J. I. Packer expresses it:

This is a condition of denial in which an unfulfilled spirit of mourning, driven deep

and still hurting subliminally, sours our conscious life with bitterness, cynicism, apathy, cosmic resentment, and unforgiveness of any who in any way seem to have contributed to the loved one's death. (2)

What we find in these closing lines, "happily ever after" style though they appear to be, is a story of how God unravels Job's twisted soul. Now that the lesson of His sovereignty has been learned (could Job have learned it any other way?), God restores to him in a way that displays His love for Job. And in response, a forgiven Job shows forgiveness to his insensitive friends. All traces of bitterness are gone from Job's heart. Acting as priest (Job lived before priests were institutionalized within Israel) the friends bring bulls and rams in abundance as a burnt offering (42:8). Job's prayer on their behalf is heard and the friends are spared the indignation that they deserved (42:9).

Life can change! What seems like an endless winter can change into spring again. Hope returns. Life is filled with meaning and purpose again. The sounds of singing, and laughter are heard without the accompanying guilt that somehow this isn't right. Why else would the book of Job record the words: "Nowhere in all the land were there found women as beautiful as Job's daughters..." (42:15)?

There is no guarantee, this side of eternity, that Job's pattern will be anyone else's. Some are asked to carry their sorrows to the grave (but no further than the grave!). But for many, the demand is less arduous. God steps in and changes things. Life becomes bearable again. Perspectives shift.

Job lives to be an old man a hundred and forty, the age of many of the patriarchs (42:16).

Did he never think again about the ten children that he lost? Of course he did! Probably every day! But they were "quiet thoughts" those thoughts that rest content in the knowledge that God had a purpose in it all that he could not comprehend.

### **Submissive thoughts.**

Thoughts interrupted by the sound of other children playing at his feet.

If joy is, as C. S. Lewis suggests, "the serious business of heaven," then what Job receives is a little foretaste of heaven here on earth. It is not heaven itself, of course, for this world is upside down. But it is a foretaste of it, and the last verse which speaks of Job's death, is for Job, only the beginning of an eternity with God.

Does Job understand now, the reason(s) for his trials? Yes and no! Yes, in that he understands without the limitations of sin and without the purposes which

would have made such knowledge difficult to continue. We learn lessons through experience as much as anything else. But does Job now understand everything? Of course not! That would make him as knowledgeable and as wise as God Himself. Job must live with mystery in heaven, too, as we all will have to. There will be no doubting of God's benevolence or integrity in choosing the path He has for each one of us. There will be worship in the face of an infinite wisdom at work in our lives.

But there will be mystery, too.

"Oh the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!  
How unsearchable His judgments,  
and His paths beyond tracing out." (Rom 11:33)

That is still Job's song, even today.

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