



THE TOUGHEST OF QUESTIONS

This week will be the 22nd anniversary of the biggest terrorist atrocity ever committed – the destruction of the twin towers on 9/11. Nearly 3000 people died in New York City that morning, and countless others were affected by the attack itself and in the wars that came after. And for many it raised the question, “How can a good God allow such terrible things to happen?”

This is not a ‘modern’ question: people from every time, place, culture and religion have asked it. This is what the 4th century Greek philosopher Epicurus had to say:

*Either God wants to abolish evil, and cannot;
Or He can, but does not want to;
Or He cannot and does not want to.
If He wants to, but cannot, He is powerless.
If He can, and does not want to, He is wicked.
But, if God both can and wants to abolish evil,
How comes evil is in the world?*

That’s the problem, in a nutshell.

So, why does a good and great God allow such terrible things to happen? Over the next 3 months we’re going to look at a book that many believe is the answer to that question – the book of Job. But as we’ll see, the answer is neither simple nor straightforward – because life isn’t. But there are answers, of a sort. So, let’s take a look at the book’s prologue:

Job 1-2:10

What are we looking at when we read this book? Did these events actually happen? Personally, I believe the story is based on the experiences of an historical figure – but that's kind of irrelevant. What we're reading here is a folk-tale, a parable, adopted by the Israelites and turned into a wisdom book on suffering. A thought-experiment.

So, what does Job tell us about the meaning of suffering?

To answer that, we have to get what it tells us about:

1) Job. The story is set in the land of Uz (modern day Jordan / Saudi-Arabia), somewhere around 2000 BC. So, it's a non-Israelite story, about a non-Israelite man. But we're also told 3 times in chs1-2 that Job is a righteous man – *tam v'yasar* or 'blameless and upright' – twice by God Himself! Not perfect (important point, that), but blameless and upright. Job lives to please God, and like many a parent, he prays that his kids will do the same (and offers sacrifices for them in case they haven't).

And Job is wealthy – in every sense of the word. God has blessed him with everything life can offer. But in 2 brief windows of time, he's going to lose just about everything.

So, straight away the book challenges one of the big assumptions we make about suffering – that it's all down to personal sin, bad karma, disobedience to Allah, failure to say enough Hail Marys, etc. That if you're healthy and wealthy, God is pleased; and if you aren't, it means He's not. But the book of Job upends that kind of theology. Job is one of the Bible's good guys, and yet he loses all but his life (because it's not his time yet). The point is: how we see Job affects how we see suffering.

In us, and others.

2) God. To answer the question of suffering, you have to look beyond this world. And that's where the intro takes us: God's throne room; a meeting of God and His angels; and an explanation for suffering you won't find anywhere else, in any other religious texts.

A *bet*.

In this passage, Job gets caught up in a wager between God and *ha-satan*, 'the accuser.' Satan says to God, "I'll bet You if You take away Job's blessings, he'll curse You to Your face." And God says, "You're on."

Now, maybe it's just that I'm not as spiritually minded as I should be, but this seems downright unfair. It sounds like we're nothing more than chips in a game of cosmic poker. So how are we supposed to view this? Well, if God is doing this merely for His sake, then yes, it's unfair. But what if He's doing it for our sakes? To shape us into the people He knows we can be? And to prove that we are greater than the devil thinks we are; than the devil himself is? The only way to do that is by allowing us to suffer.

But it also says something that some people can find challenging, others comforting: that nothing can happen to us without God allowing it.

That He is sovereign.

Always.

3) Trouble. So, off goes the adversary. And then, in 2 bursts of extreme bad luck, Job loses:

- His fortune (from wealthiest to poorest man in 1 day).
- His family (his children die and so does his marriage).
- His fitness (he's struck with a horrifying skin-disease).
- His friends (he's ostracised – sent to the city dump).

How does Job respond to all this? Just as God predicted. After round 1, he tears his robe, shaves his head, and worships (1:20-22). And after round 2, he corrects his wife, who is clearly having a crisis of her own (2:9-10).

And the point is made very clear: Job trusts God.

What does this tell us about suffering? That it's a sign, not of God's disapproval, but of His approval. Perhaps that's why every occurrence of the word 'curse' in chs1-2 is *barakh* or 'bless' in Hebrew. Why? Part sarcasm, part respect for the divine name, it may also be a clue as to how to view life's troubles – not as curses, but as blessings. Because the only way God can prove that we love Him, for who He is, is to take away some of the benefits.

Which is something God would end up doing Himself, too. Giving up everything as a way of saying, "I love you."

The Tougher Question

Victor Frankl once wrote: "We have very little freedom over the things that occur in our lives. But the one freedom we do have is how we choose to respond to those things." We might choose anger, bitterness, resentment. Or hope, gratitude, transformation. But we have to *choose*.

It's a bit like a glo-stick. For a glo-stick to glow, you have to? Break it. And the same is true of us. Job doesn't realise it, but what he's going through is part of a far bigger story, and God is going to speak to Job, his friends, and others, through these events. But for that to happen – for that story and glory to show – we have to be willing for God to break us.

And that's point no.1 of the book of Job. Not "Here's why God allows suffering", but an even tougher question:

"Will you continue to trust God, no matter what? Will you worship Him even if He breaks you? Will you allow Him to make you the person He wants you to be?"

Will you?