

Help from On High

by Ray C. Stedman

In our last study we left Job like a man in prison, planning his case for his appearance before God. Anyone who has anything to do with prisoners knows that you soon develop “prison attorneys” – men waiting for trial who haunt the prison libraries to study law books to get their case all together. Sometimes they become such experts in law that they actually assume the presentation of their own case before the jury.

Job is like that, and Chapter 13 describes how, through the long hours of anguish, he is planning what he would say if God ever gave him a chance. We will open by looking at **the case he has prepared before God**. He has divided it into four major points that he wants to make.

The first one is a *plea for certain conditions* that he feels he needs before he is able to stand and talk to God, Verses 19-21:

**“Who is there that will contend with me?
For then I would be silent and die.
Only grant two things to me,
then I will not hide myself from thy face:
withdraw thy hand far from me,
and let not dread of thee terrify me.
Then call, and I will answer;
or let me speak, and do thou reply to me.”**
{Job 13:19-21 RSV}

C. S. Lewis has well said that to argue with God is to argue with the very power that makes it possible to argue at all. And Job senses that. He knows that he must have mercy from God before he can even stand before him, so he asks that two conditions be granted him: one, that God will lift the pain and anguish that he is going through so

that he does not have to speak out of this constant torment of body; and second, that God would so veil his presence that Job will not be terrified by the awesomeness of a mighty God. It is a vivid description of the sense of God that this man has, even in his hour of anguish.

One thing you never find Job doing is forsaking his consciousness of the character of God. Even though he wonders at what God is doing, and feels that he is being mistreated in many ways, he always has the sense of the majesty of God. Here he asks that he be delivered from that fear so that he might present his case.

Then the next division is *Job’s cry for knowledge*. He needs some information before he can go on, Verse 23:

**“How many are my iniquities and my sins?
Make me know my transgression and my
sin.”** {Job 13:23 RSV}

It is universally recognized in any court of law that a prisoner has the right to know what the charges are against him. This is Job’s dilemma. He does not really know what is the trouble, although he has searched his heart. His theology – along with that of his friends – tells him that punishment and suffering come because of sin. But what sin? That is what he cannot answer. And so he cries out, “What have I done? How have I offended?” This is the instinctive cry of a suffering heart: “What have I done? Why is this happening to me?” Job eloquently expresses that.

Then *he protests the silence of God*, and his apparent anger against him, Verses 24-27:

**“Why dost thou hide thy face,
and count me as thy enemy?
Wilt thou frighten a driven leaf
and pursue dry chaff?
For thou writest bitter things against me,
and makest me inherit the iniquities of my
youth.
Thou puttest my feet in the stocks,
and watchest all my paths;
thou settest a bound to the soles of my
feet.” {Job 13:24-27 RSV}**

The only thing that occurs to Job that may be the answer to this unrelenting pain is that God is going back and *picking up the sins of his past* – even the sins of his youth – despite the fact that he had offered sacrifices to be delivered of them, according to God’s program.

Then in Chapter 14, in two beautifully expressed, marvelously moving passages, Job brings out **the helplessness and the hopelessness of man before God**. First, he is helpless to control his affairs, Verses 1-2:

**“Man that is born of a woman is of few
days,
and full of trouble.
He comes forth like a flower, and withers;
he flees like a shadow, and continues not.”
{Job 14:1-2 RSV}**

And yet God brings this limited, helpless man who is a victim of circumstances and judges him for things that he cannot help. This is Job’s feeling, Verses 5-6:

**“Since his days are determined,
and the number of his months is with thee,
and thou hast appointed his bounds ...”
{Job 14:5a RSV}**

“What can man do? He is a victim of what happens to him.” This is the expression of Job’s heart, and many have felt this way. “I can’t help it that I was born into this situation, subjected to these pressures, and these circumstances. What can I do?” This is the basis of Job’s plea.

The latter part, in Verses 7-12, expresses very eloquently man’s sense of hopelessness – there is no way to go back and do it over again. Who of us

has not said, “Oh, I wish I could go back and live it through again – at least some aspects of it. If I could go back, knowing what I know now, I think I could make a much better record. I could clear up so many of the mistakes that I made. Give me another chance, God, now that I have learned what I need to know.” That is a universal feeling, and Job feels that. Yet he expresses his consciousness that this is impossible, Verses 7, 10-12:

**“For there is hope for a tree,
if it be cut down, that it will sprout again,
and that its shoots will not cease. {Job
14:7 RSV}
“But a man dies, and is laid low;
man breathes his last, and where is he?
As waters fall from a lake,
and a river wastes away and dries up,
So a man lies down and rises not again;
till the heavens are no more ...” {Job
14:10-12a RSV}**

That is Job’s pessimistic view of life. I think here we are dealing with a great problem that everyone faces. We have a distorted view of this present life, which Job expresses in these eloquent terms.

He goes on in the next passage, Verses 13-17, to *cry out for a kind of purgatory after life*:

**“Oh that thou wouldest hide me in Sheol,
that thou wouldest conceal me until thy
wrath be past,
that thou wouldest appoint me a set time,
and remember me!” {Job 14:13 RSV}**

And then he asks again:

**“If a man die, shall he live again?” {Job
14:14a RSV}**

And the hope that something could be worked out causes him to say,

**“All the days of my service I would wait,
till my release should come.” {Job 14:14b
RSV}**

That vividly describes what a joy it would be to stand before God with God’s wrath already past. Now Job is not describing this because he thinks it is possible for him. He is trying to voice the inar-

ticulate longings of the human heart to be freed from guilt – guilt that you do not always feel you can help – and somehow having some kind of a condition that would set you free. This is what has given rise to the hope among mankind for a purgatory after death, where you can pay for some of your sins, but the rest of them are set aside, so that at last you can stand before God, accepted of him.

Chapter 14 closes with a *vivid description of the hopelessness of man*, nevertheless, Verses 18-22:

**“But the mountain falls and crumbles away,
and the rock is removed from its place;
the waters wear away the stones;
the torrents wash away the soil of the
earth;
so thou destroyest the hope of man.
Thou prevailest for ever against him, and
he passes;
thou changest his countenance, and
sendest him away.
His sons come to honor, and he does not
know it;
they are brought low, and he perceives it
not.
He feels only the pain of his own body,
and he mourns only for himself.” {Job
14:18-22 RSV}**

Here we have in Job a vivid and beautiful expression of what is wrong with our view of life. Job is looking at life as a natural man, and he sees it as the world sees it, that everything is for now. This life is the wholly important thing, and the reason you were brought into existence is to make something out of this present experience – you never get another chance. We are reminded of that on television: “You only go around once! If you are going to live, live with gusto.” We are constantly exhorted by the world, with its distorted understanding of life, to seize the present moment – you will never get another one. “If you don’t make it now, it will be too late.” This is one of the major reasons why even Christian couples are breaking up, sometimes after 25 or 30 years of marriage. People begin to feel the force of this argument and they believe it. They think the only thing left, if there is to be any pleasure and enjoyment in life, is to seize the present moment. “I have not been able to put it all together in all this time, so I’m going to

leave and start over.” Many a marriage is broken on that rock.

Now, that is a faulty view of life, and that is what God is teaching Job in this book. This is not what it is all about. This is not why human existence is given to us; this is but the school time, a time of preparation to get ready for the real life that lies ahead. Compare Job’s view of life with the revelation of the New Testament, and the view of New Testament writers, as to what lies beyond death and you see a stark and vivid contrast. They look forward to something so beautiful and grand and glorious breaking upon them that they could hardly wait to seize it! But here you get only the idea that everything must be done now.

I think this is why we get upset with ourselves and with life, at times. We feel life has been put together backwards. You have to make all the major decisions right at the time when you know practically nothing, when you are so callow and uninformed that you can hardly even see things right. You have to choose the wife of your youth at a time when you are not able to judge yourself, let alone anyone else. This is what Job is feeling here; there is no way back.

Round one is complete; they have all had a chance at Job. Now his **friends gird up their loins, sharpen their spears, and come at him again.**

In the first six verses, Eliphaz the Temanite charges Job with *presumptuous words*:

**“Should a wise man answer with windy
knowledge,
and fill himself with the east wind?
Should he argue in unprofitable talk,
or in words with which he can do no good?
But you are doing away with the fear of
God,
and hindering meditation before God.
For your own iniquity teaches your mouth,
and you choose the tongue of the crafty.
Your own mouth condemns you, and not I;
and your own lips testify against you.”
{Job 15:2-6 RSV}**

Eliphaz started out very courteously, but now he has dropped his courtesy, and he is thrusting deeply. Then he charges Job with *pretentious claims*, Verses 7-9:

**“Are you the first man that was born?
Or were you brought forth before the
hills?
Have you listened in the council of God?
And do you limit wisdom to yourself?
What do you know that we do not know?
What do you understand that is not clear
to us?” {Job 15:7-9 RSV}**

“We have the same sources of knowledge as you, Job. Why do you put us down, and think yourself so smart?”

Then he returns, as all the friends do, to their *narrow and worn-out theology*, Verses 14-16:

**“What is man, that he can be clean?
Or he that is born of a woman, that he can
be righteous?
Behold, God puts no trust in his holy ones,
and the heavens are not clean in his sight;
How much less one who is abominable and
corrupt,
a man who drinks iniquity like water!”
{Job 15:14-16 RSV}**

Of course, Eliphaz has Job in mind here, “a man abominable and corrupt, a man who drinks iniquity like water.” I hope you have seen the fault in this line of argument. It is not that their theology is wrong, it is right. Eliphaz is pointing out the general nature of the depravity of man, the Fall, and its effects upon human life. And he says rightly that there is nobody who is clean, nobody who is righteous before God. But what he fails to do is to point out to Job specifically what it is that he has done. How can you deal with evil if you do not know what it is? The great revelation that God is seeking to help Job to understand is the nature of the corruptness of his heart. But God never charges him with fault until Job begins to see what is wrong, while these men come ready to charge him with every ugly thing in the book though they had no proof whatsoever, and Job’s life gives the lie to all their charges. As a matter of fact, they themselves are guilty of the very things that they set before Job because they too are part of the human race. Eliphaz is a man born of woman, so he is guilty with Job under this, but you never hear a word of self-condemnation from him.

This is the terrible fault of these friends, and I hope it teaches us a very needed lesson. When we go to talk with somebody who is in trouble, or in pain, or suffering, or even sinful – obviously so – we must never take the position of priggish smugness, or a complacency that pictures us as being right and true, and the other one as wrong.

Eliphaz goes on in a long passage to argue again from experience. He goes back over all the past and says, “My thesis is true, everything proves it: God will not let a man get by with wickedness. The wicked are going to be punished. Therefore, **if you are being punished you must be wicked!**” He says in Verse 34:

**“The company of the godless is barren,
and fire consumes the tent of bribery.
They conceive mischief and bring forth evil
and their heart prepares deceit.” {Job
15:34-35 RSV}**

It is the same old tired thrust at Job: he must be guilty of some terrible sin.

In Chapters 16 and 17 Job answers. He does not know what to say, but he is trying to be honest. The great thing about Job is that he is no hypocrite; he never tries to cover over or set his case in a better light – he simply **blurts out all the hurt and anguish of his heart** as best he can.

He also *rebukes these men for their misunderstanding*, Chapter 16, Verses 1-5:

**Then Job answered:
“I have heard many such things;
miserable comforters are you all.
Shall windy words have an end?
Or what provokes you that you answer?
I also could speak as you do,
if you were in my place;
I could join words together against you,
and shake my head at you.
I could strengthen you with my mouth,
and the solace of my lips would assuage
your pain.” {Job 16:1-5 RSV}**

Sarcastic words, coming from a man who is tortured. You can see from this that Satan, though he has faded from the scene, is still there in the background using these friends as channels for what the apostle Paul calls “the fiery darts of the

wicked one; the accusations of the accuser against the brethren.” Let us beware lest we become a channel for Satan’s accusations against someone who is suffering as Job is suffering here.

Then Job goes on to state the facts as he understands them. First he says, “All I can conclude from what I am suffering is that *God must hate me.*” Verses 7 and 9:

**“Surely now God has worn me out;
he has made desolate all my company.
And he has shriveled me up ...”**
{Job 16:7-8a RSV}
**“He has torn me in his wrath, and hated
me;
he has gnashed his teeth at me;”**
{Job 16:9a RSV}

Job goes on to show how even the people around him have rejected him, and how God is behind that, Verses 10-13:

**“Men have gaped at me with their mouth,
they have struck me insolently upon the
cheek,
they mass themselves together against me.
God gives me up to the ungodly,
and casts me into the hands of the wicked.
I was at ease, and he broke me asunder;
he seized me by the neck and dashed me to
pieces;
He set me up as his target,
his archers surround me.”**
{Job 16:10-13a RSV}

Here Job charges God with all that is wrong in his life. Yet God is wonderfully patient. He does not reply against Job, nor does he strike him down in anger. Job is certainly not the highest example of faith in the scriptures. Men like Paul suffered extremely, as did Job. We think of that silent sufferer in the Garden of Gethsemane, who, “when he was reviled, reviled not again, but committed himself unto Him who judges righteously,” {cf, 1 Pet 2:23 KJV}. How much higher is that level of response than what we see in the book of Job. But Job is the example for us of how our natural view of life must be broken through, so that we begin to see things in a different light. This book is here to teach us that God sometimes has to translate theol-

ogy into painful experience before we really begin to grasp what he is trying to say to us.

Job ends by **protesting his innocence** again, Verses 16-17:

**“My face is red with weeping,
and on my eyelids is deep darkness;
although there is no violence in my hands,
and my prayer is pure.”**
{Job 16:16-17 RSV}

Then once again, as we have seen already, breaking through into Job’s consciousness is a *dim reflection of what God is trying to show him,* Verses 18-19:

**“O earth, cover not my blood,
and let my cry find no resting place.
Even now, behold, my witness is in
heaven,
and he that vouches for me is on high.”**
{Job 16:18-19 RSV}

Despite the charge that Job makes against God (that this is all coming from his hand), faith breaks through at this point to say that God must also supply the answer – God alone can explain what is happening to him. And Job’s faith lays hold of that great fact.

Every now and then I talk to someone who is going through a time of struggle and trial, and he asks the same question Job asks, “Why is it?” The answer given most often in Scripture is that God has sent it to wean us from dependence on people to find our resources in God himself. God has to separate us from these supports that sustain us in hours of crisis, in order that we may learn how fully able he is to sustain us. The truth is gradually breaking upon Job that God himself can answer these searching questions of his heart.

In Chapter 17 we find **Job’s prayer that God will set him free.** He prays for relief, largely from his friends! He has had enough of them. He expresses his need for defense, in Verses 3-6; he describes the effects of his suffering upon others, especially these men; and then he challenges them in Verse 10:

**“But you, come on again, all of you,
and I shall not find a wise man among
you.” {Job 17:10 RSV}**

He has heard all their arguments, and he knows they do not help, so in the final part of the chapter he sinks back again into the darkness of despair, Verse 11:

**“My days are past, my plans are broken
off,
the desires of my heart.” {Job 17:11 RSV}**

In Chapter 18 you have **Bildad’s defensive re-tort**, and it reflects the same line of argument as before. Bildad is the logician, the coldly analytical intellectual. He is angry and upset that Job does not answer him in kindly fashion, and that Job has accused him of being unkind in his approach, so he gets angry, Verses 1-3:

**“How long will you hunt for words?
Consider, and then we will speak.
Why are we counted as cattle?
Why are we stupid in your sight?”
{Job 18:2-3 RSV}**

Bildad goes on from Verse 5 to the end of the chapter to set forth again the narrow, rigid dogma of his theology: If you are suffering, you must have sinned. I once heard a man described as “an evangelical crab.” That is what I think of when I read these words of Bildad the Shuhite. He gets angry when his words do not get attention.

Chapter 19 gives us **the piteous plea of Job**: First, he describes *his feelings about his friends*, Verses 1-3:

**“How long will you torment me,
and break me in pieces with words?
These ten times you have cast reproach
upon me;
are you not ashamed to wrong me?”
{Job 19:2-3 RSV}**

Then, in Verses 7-12, he describes *his bafflement at what is happening to him*:

**“Behold, I cry out ‘Violence!’ but I am not
answered;
I call aloud, but there is no justice.**

**He has walled up my ways,
so that I cannot pass...” {Job 19:7-8a RSV}**

**“He has stripped from me my glory,” {Job
19:9a RSV}**

**“He breaks me down on every side,” {Job
19:10a RSV}**

In Verses 13-20 we have *a vivid description of the isolation he feels*:

**“He has put my brethren far from me,
and my acquaintances are wholly es-
tranged from me.
My kinsfolk and my close friends have
failed me;
the guests in my house have forgotten me;
my maidservants count me as a stranger;
I have become an alien in their eyes.
I call to my servant, but he gives me no an-
swer;
I must beseech him with my mouth.
I am repulsive to my wife,
loathsome to the sons of my own mother.
Even young children despise me;
when I rise they talk against me.
All my intimate friends abhor me...” {Job
19:13-19a RSV}**

Surely nothing is harder to bear than rejection by all who should understand. Job is feeling the terrible pain of this, as well as the physical pain. But in the midst of the darkness, when it is blackest and gloomiest, one of those amazing rays of light breaks through again. Elisabeth Elliot has written a book called *The Slowly Growing Light*, and I think that is descriptive of what Job is going through here, for he cries in Verse 23:

**“Oh that my words were written!
Oh that they were inscribed in a book!
Oh that with an iron pen and lead
they were graven in the rock for ever!”
{Job 19:23-24 RSV}**

And then suddenly he sees *a ray of hope*,

**“For I know that my Redeemer lives,
and at last he will stand upon the earth;
and after my skin has been thus destroyed,
then in my flesh I shall see God,**

whom I shall see on my side [i.e., for myself],
and my eyes shall behold, and not another.” {Job 19:25-27a RSV}

And in response to that vision of faith, he cries,

“My heart faints within me!” {Job 19:27b RSV}

This is one of the great words of faith in the Old Testament, one of the earliest intimations of the resurrection of the body that you find in the Word of God. Slowly, through the anguish and gloom of this man’s heart, born out of the passion and the pathos that he feels, comes the dawning realization that God is working out a great and mighty purpose, and that one of these days God himself (whom Job has never failed to see is a God of great majesty and power), shall be visibly present before men. God shall come himself, and shall vindicate all that he does. This is a marvelous glance ahead by faith to the incarnation of the Lord. Job calls him “My Redeemer, my vindicator, the one who is related to me, who nevertheless will defend me and vindicate all that has happened to me.”

I think there is nothing that the study of this book of Job does for us more than to understand that life is basically a mystery. We are surrounded with mystery. We cannot comprehend it all; it is painted on too large a canvas; it is too great and involved for us to grasp it all. The ways of God are beyond us many, many times, and yet. Job is gradually learning in the midst of his pain to trust the God who is there; so trust that he will come up with answers, and that he is working out a purpose in line with his love. That is what life gradually teaches us.

At a recent seminar, Elisabeth Elliot described briefly her first widowhood. Her husband was slain along with four companions in the jungles of Ecuador at the hands of savages. She spent 13 years as a widow, and then she married a gracious and wonderful man with whom she was very happy for just a few more years. Then he died, taken by cancer. She said, “I have spent six-sevenths of my life single, though I have been married twice. I did not choose the gift of widowhood,

but I accepted it as the sphere in which I am to live to the glory of God.”

That is what Job is gradually learning. God is working out a purpose. It is not related to specific sin although, as we will see before the book is over, Job learns much more about the depravity of his own nature.

But now he ends by *warning his friends* to be careful about judging him, Verses 28-29:

**“If you say, ‘How we will pursue him!’
and, ‘The root of the matter is found in him’:
be afraid of the sword,
for wrath brings the punishment of the sword,
that you may know that there is a judgment.”** {Job 19:28-29 RSV}

Some time ago I ran across these words by an unknown poet that I think wraps up in a beautiful fashion the lesson of the book of Job to this point:

When God wants to drill a man,
And thrill a man,
And skill a man;
When God wants to mold a man
To play the noblest part,
When he yearns with all his heart
To create so great and bold a man
That all the world shall be amazed,
Watch his methods, watch his ways –

How he ruthlessly perfects
Whom he royally elects.
How he hammers him and hurts him,
And with mighty blows, converts him
Into trial shapes of clay
Which only God understands,

While his tortured heart is crying,
And he lifts beseeching hands.
How he bends but never breaks
When his good he undertakes.
How he uses whom he chooses,
And with every purpose, fuses him,
By every act, induces him
To try his splendor out.
God knows what he’s about.

That is the message of Job to us.

Some of you may be going through pain, suffering, disappointment and anguish, and you are crying out, as Job did, “Why? What have I done? Where does it all fit together?”

Job’s answer to us (as all of Scripture’s answer) is, “God knows what he is about. One of these days all the answers will come in. In the meantime, rest in confidence that he knows what he is doing with you.”

Prayer:

Thank you, our Father, for this reassurance to us who are going through far less than even Job went through, with much greater light. Help us to cling to that light, and not charge you with injustice, as Job did, for we have no excuse, such as he had. Help us to accept, Lord, what is happening to us as your hand works out vast and wonderful patterns in our lives. We ask in Jesus’ name, Amen.