

OLD TESTAMENT PERSONALITIES

"IV. Job"

INTRODUCTION

The book of Job is one of the most frequently mentioned books of the Bible, yet perhaps one of the least often read. If anyone talks at length about the "patience of Job", you can be relatively sure that he has not gotten beyond the second chapter of the book, for Job developed into one of the most impatient of men. Or, if anyone refers to the book of Job as though it contained easy answers to the problem of the suffering of the innocent, he reveals a lack of understanding about the book, because it does not contain any neat formulas.

The pages of Job form a poem about a man who had the rug pulled out from under him as far as his personal fortunes and health were concerned. The poem is about that man's friends who came to him with all kinds of advice and theorizing, most of which seems pretty silly to us. And the poem is about God and the part that he played in it all.

WHEN WE FIRST MEET JOB

When we first meet Job, he is the perfect subject for a "man of distinction" portrait. He happened to be a successful gentleman farmer, but he might have been a bank president, or a corporation head, or a college president. And not only was he successful in the eyes of men, but more significant, he was successful in the sight of God. "Blameless and upright" - the opening verses make it clear. He would be one of those men whose employees fairly worshipped him because of his sense of fairness, his even temper, and his genuine concern for each of them and their problems, one of those men who would be a powerhouse in a community, one of those men who would make a great Sunday School teacher with people coming back years later to thank him for his insights and his interest, one of those men who would make a wonderful father, thoughtful and understanding. When we are told that Job was the "greatest of all of the people of the east", we have a picture of greatness that is not alone of fame and fortune, but also of a greatness that is of character.

THE PICTURE CHANGES

And then all of a sudden the picture changes - just as the cloudless serenity of a summer's day can give way to the fury of a dark thunderstorm. Everything happened to Job. His servants were killed; his cattle and his crops were destroyed; his lost lost their lives. From every direction troubled and tragedy descended on him. And there sat Job in the ruins of it all, with nothing more, as Robert Louis Stevenson put it, "than the half of a broken hope for a pillow at night". But if he thought that he had touched bottom and had seen the worst, he was mistaken. It was as though the forces of misfortune and misery were receding only to reorganize for the next onslaught. And this time they took away about the only thing that Job had left - his health - and left him covered from head to foot with sores that would not heal.

Whoever wrote the book of Job knew something about physical suffering, too, for listen to Job's lament:

"I am not at ease, nor am I quiet;
I have no rest...
When I lie down I say, 'When shall I arise?'
But the night is long,
And I am full of tossing till the dawn.
Why is light given to him that is in misery,
And life to the bitter in soul,
Why long for death, but it comes not..
Why is light given to a man whose way is hid,
Whom God has hedged in?"

Now Job is not just a character from the pages of the Old Testament. You know Job among your friends and acquaintances. Job is that father whose son or daughter was mowed down the other day by a hit-and-run driver, less than a year after the wife and mother of the family had died of cancer. Job is a patient in the county home with nothing but memories of life and health that one day were. Job is that young man with multiple sclerosis and with gradually diminishing powers of strength and coordination. Job is all around us. And to a certain degree every person recognizes Job as himself. Sometimes we say, "well, it was one of those days" and again, "Well, it was one of those years" - times when nothing seems to go right, and we stub our toes and bruise our hearts at every bend in the road. In a way, most of us have no understanding at all of Job and his troubles - but in another way, there is just enough of Job in every life that we think he's a relative.

HIS FRIENDS AND THEIR ADVICE

But whether or not we see ourselves in Job, we will surely recognize our likeness in Job's friends. As soon as three of his friends heard that Job was sick, they dropped what they were doing and rushed to see Job. In some ways they deserve credit. They were not just fair-weather friends who wanted the dividends of Job's popularity and prestige, but who could think of a hundred and one excuses why they couldn't help out when he needed them. Let this be said about them - they were there in Job's hour of need. Further, we are told that for a week they just stayed with Job and said very little. This is always a mark of real friendship - to be able to be with a person and not be embarrassed by silence.

But the time came when they could no longer be still and they started to talk to Job about his troubles. It still happens, doesn't it? Sometimes we can be with friends or loved ones just so long and we feel constrained to tell them how to bring up their children or how to run their homes or how to conquer their fears and their phobias. Just so with the friends of Job. One by one they offered their advice. "Now if I were you...." so they would begin. The only thing is that they were not Job, and they could know next to nothing about the burning in his body and the feeling in his soul. It is the easiest thing in the world and at the same time the one absolutely impossible thing to tell other people how to solve their troubles.

How often do I, who am not an alcoholic or a drug addict, have advice for the alcoholic or the addict. How often do I, who am not in mourning, tell those who grieve that they must pull themselves together and push ahead. How often do I, who am not a Russian or an Indian or a Chinese or an American-Negro in a ghetto, have it in precise form what the Russians or the Indians or the Chinese or the Negroes should do and not do.

Sometime ago I came across a story that appeared in a number of our magazines - how a high school teacher was called to a faculty meeting to discuss certain pupils whose conduct had become a neighborhood problem. And the principal said, "What is it we have not taught them, that they should behave like savages?" And the young teacher ventured an answer of only one word - "compassion". And she was proclaiming our poverty from the housetops. We are so strong on knowledge, so short on understanding; so loaded with advice, so lacking in compassion. "The world" someone has said, "perishes not of dark, but of cold". And Job almost perished - not of dark, but of cold.

And then Job's friends tried that old bromide about a better day tomorrow, and you can almost see them slapping Job on the back, grinning from ear to ear. "Cheer up, friend, a year from now you will look back and laugh at this". Except that the language of the poem is must more stately:

"You will forget your misery;
You will remember it as waters that have passed away.
And your life will be brighter than the noonday;
Its darkness will be like the morning".

It so happened that Job's friends were right in their predictions. There was a happy ending to Job's story - and his latter days were better than his earlier days. But it was hardly because of their shallow philosophy. For one thing, it didn't help Job in the depths to be told that someday he'd snap out of it - any more than it helps to tell someone who has lost a loved one that someday they'll get over it. Sometimes the present is so overwhelming that nobody cares a hoot about the future.

But worse yet, Job's friends must have had their tongues in their cheeks and their fingers crossed when they assured him that everything would work out all right - tomorrow. Because it doesn't - not always. Not if you equate "all right" as meaning peace and prosperity. It didn't with Jesus - with Paul - with others down through the centuries.

What kind of religion, you begin to ask, was it really that was behind all of the advice that these friends had to offer Job. This is the theme that kept running through all of their words - "you must be suffering as a judgement of God because of some sin you have committed". Oh, at first they were very tactful about it, but as they went on they became less tactful and more blunt. "Is not your wickedness great? There is no end to your iniquities". In other words, what sin are you hiding Job that you have committed that God should deal with you this way.

As far as Job's friends were concerned, they believed in a God who meted out rewards and punishments in perfect proportion to a man's obedience or his rebellion. It was that simple. Job must have incurred God's displeasure or the almighty would not have loosed his arrows of adversity.

It's such a neat little formula and it would be very nice to hold onto, as indeed some people try to. For months I saw in a hospital a woman who was slowly dying of cancer, and while I with stumbling lips would try to talk about the grace of God and the love of God as revealed in Christ, one of Job's comforters would visit her every now and again and pontificate that what was happening to her was surely a judgment of God upon her sinfulness.

That was pretty raw and most of us would rebel against it, and yet it is surprising how many of us hold on to a more refined form of the argument of Job's friends. "What have I done" we wail when sickness or sorrow or failure lays us low. "I've always gone to church and said my prayers and tried to be a good person. What have I done that God should treat me like this."

And I wonder what God must think of such heresy - for it's just that when you measure it along side the words and ways of Jesus. "Your Father.....sends rain on the just and on the unjust". "In this world, you shall have trouble". "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross". And then as though words were not enough, there was a cross on a hill one Friday afternoon to further confound the descendants of Job's friends who had reduced God to a pair of scales. The cross made a mockery of the old platitude "be good and you'll be happy" for here was the best man that the world had ever known getting the worst deal that men could hand out. And so there were two possibilities: either Jesus was a fake and a failure,

or just maybe God had chosen this way of letting us in on his sense that was beyond our sense - his love that was beyond our tragedies.

"We preach Christ crucified" said Paul, "a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called.....the power of God and the wisdom of God". The God of Jesus was so much bigger than the God of Job's friends. There was justice to his God, too, and more often than not you could see its outlines but infinitely more than that there was love which came to stand alongside a person no matter what, and no matter whether he could quite understand the "what" until at length it was the love that counted most and not the trouble.

LIGHTER FOR JOB

It got lighter for Job one day, too, when his friends had finished all their explaining and Job was tired from his protesting and his arguing. There was God. Perhaps he had been there all the while, but there had been too much on the agenda up to that point to pay any attention to his attempts to get the floor. But all of a sudden Job had an appointment with God. And it wasn't that God turned question marks into periods, or handed Job the solution, or drew diagrams on the blackboard. He didn't. But for Job it was like looking out into the eastern sky on a winter morning, little before seven and catching the first faint promise of daybreak. It wasn't that God had solved the "why" with which Job had first started his fierce protesting - but rather it was that God had dissolved the "why" until it was no longer the burning question.

We read in the New Testament, "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself". This is the heart of our Christian faith - "not" as P. T. Forsyth writes, "the answer to a riddle, but the victory in a battle". And you feel the first faint promise of it there in the book of Job. Of all men, Job would understand what the Christian faith is all about - how one night "God came down the stairs of heaven with a child in his arms" - and entered into life at its lowest and ran the whole gamut of human experience - to prove that nothing - absolutely nothing - was beyond his comprehension or his caring. I wonder how often the full force of the Christian faith has struck people, when in the midst of their gropings for answers and sometimes their gripings because the answers were not clear, they have been silent a moment to strike the deepest truth of all - "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself".

LET US PRAY:

As we go on our way, O God, with the winds often against us, help us to trust and believe in the best we know, to do the best we can and to be the best we are. Save us from all cheap and easy explanations, and lead us more and more into the deep understanding of thy truth that is in Christ Jesus, Thy Son, our Lord and our God. Amen