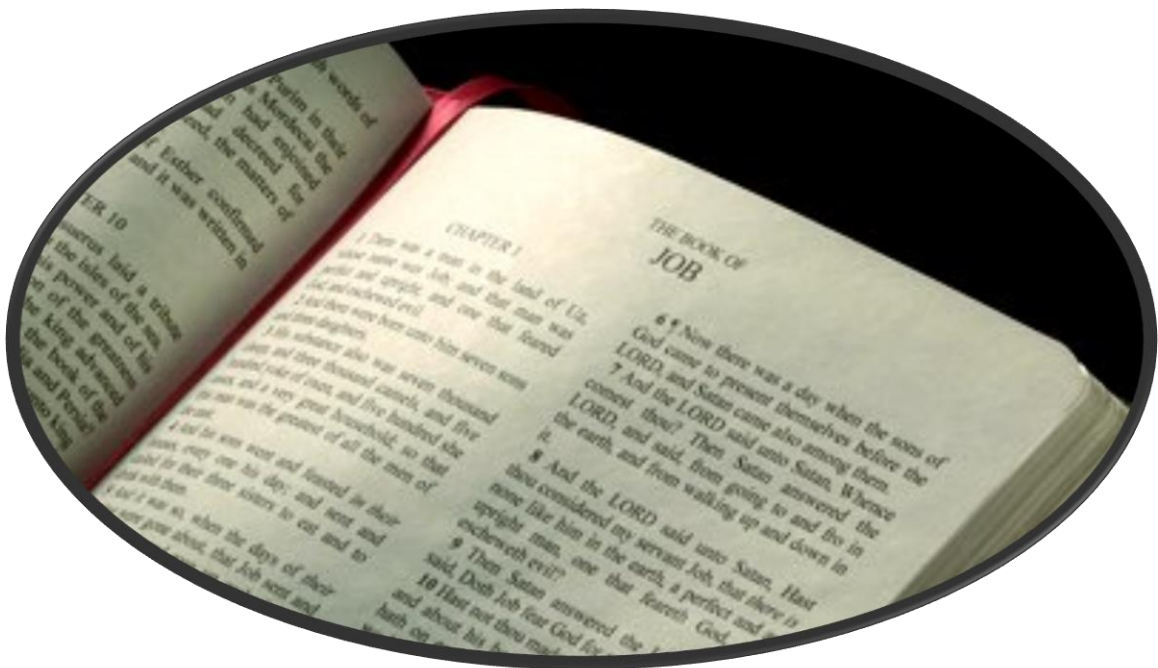


JOB

JOB SUFFERS ADVICE



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

Job 2:9-5:7: Job Suffers Advice

Job is crushed by these calamities and cries out in pain.

His wife and friends provide little comfort.

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Thank you.

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1 Job 2:9-10 (ESV)

Then his wife said to him, "Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die." But he said to her, "You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

At first glance, Job's wife's response seems incredibly stupid, even evil. But it's not really all that abnormal. Think for a minute how you'd react. Don't forget, she just lost all her children.

I can't imagine how I'd react and I know even less about how a mother would react. Mrs. Job has obviously cracked under the stress, and her faith is failing. It's easy to sit back reading this and think that we'd be stronger in her situation, but how do we know?

CS Lewis has a brilliant explanation of a similar issue in his discussion of forgiveness in *Mere Christianity*. He addresses those who challenge the concept of biblical forgiveness in the context of WWII. *And half of you already want to ask me, "I wonder how you'd feel about forgiving the Gestapo if you were a Pole or a Jew."*

So do I. I wonder very much. Just as when Christianity tells me that I must not deny my religion even to save myself from death by torture, I wonder what very much what I should do when it came to the point. I am not trying to tell you what I could do—I can do precious little—I am telling you what Christianity is. I did not invent it. And right in the middle of it, I find "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those that sin against us."

Sometimes the simplest sayings are the most profound – supernatural strength is supernatural. Mrs. Job's reaction is normal. Job's reaction isn't.

Job's blamelessness and uprightness is a gift.

One of the most important miracles in Christianity isn't recorded in Scripture. It's the uniform willingness of the eyewitnesses of the resurrection to die rather than recant. You don't learn this from the Bible; you learn it in grade school. It's in the history books.

Just like CS Lewis, I don't know if I could keep my faith under torture. The fact that the first century Christians did this consistently is a major miracle.

And what the Caesars like Nero did to them makes what happened to Job look like tiddlywinks. God gave them supernatural strength, just as He gave Job supernatural strength. We're all given spiritual gifts, but it's not easy to know what's a gift and what's just a natural talent. Frankly, the difference isn't important. Just know that you're not limited to the talents you had growing up.

Be open to the possibility that you now have a totally unexpected ability. Is God pushing you in a direction that's puzzling? Meditate on that. Ask Him to show you what he's up to.

2 Job 2:11-3:10 (ESV)

Now when Job's three friends heard of all this evil that had come upon him, they came each from his own place, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shubite, and Zophar the Naamathite. They made an appointment together to come to show him sympathy and comfort him. And when they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him. And they raised their voices and wept, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads toward heaven. And they sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great.

After this Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. And Job said:

‘Let the day perish on which I was born, and the night that said, ‘A man is conceived.’ Let that day be darkness! May God above not seek it, nor light shine upon it. Let gloom and deep darkness claim it. Let clouds dwell upon it; let the blackness of the day terrify it. That night—let thick darkness seize it! Let it not rejoice among the days of the year; let it not come into the number of the months. Behold, let that night be barren; let no joyful cry enter it. Let those curse it who curse the day, who are ready to rouse up Leviathan. Let the stars of its dawn be dark; let it hope for light, but have none, nor see the eyelids of the morning, because it did not shut the doors of my mother's womb, nor hide trouble from my eyes.’

The point of this passage is to highlight the magnitude of Job’s affliction. He’s so beat down that his friends don’t even *recognize him*. And sitting quietly for seven days isn’t some kind of male bonding; it’s a mourning ritual. Remember, Job lost all his children.

Everything Job had is gone – every possession, every blessing, all his children, and now his health. By every imaginable secular measure, his life has been destroyed. Even his wife seems to have gone around the bend, and she’s no longer an encouragement to him.

At least these three friends showed up to do whatever they can to console and comfort him. And, for the moment, they’re doing the right thing, just sitting there silently.

Job’s lamentation sounds almost sinful, but he doesn’t curse God. He’s just announcing that his pain and despair are total.

When things are bad, it’s OK to say, “Ouch.”

‘Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.’ – Matthew 5:11-12 (ESV)

This is not a command to enjoy persecution. Pain hurts. You can take heart that your heavenly rewards will be great – and that can help you endure suffering – but let’s not kid ourselves.

No one is expected to say, “Gee, this is fun.” It’s OK, even glorifying, to pray for relief.

3 Job 3:11-26 (ESV)

“Why did I not die at birth, come out from the womb and expire? Why did the knees receive me? Or why the breasts, that I should nurse? For then I would have lain down and been quiet; I would have slept; then I would have been at rest, with kings and counselors of the earth who rebuilt ruins for themselves, or with princes who had gold, who filled their houses with silver. Or why was I not as a hidden stillborn child, as infants who never see the light? There the wicked cease from troubling, and there the weary are at rest. There the prisoners are at ease together; they hear not the voice of the taskmaster. The small and the great are there, and the slave is free from his master.

“Why is light given to him who is in misery, and life to the bitter in soul, who long for death, but it comes not, and dig for it more than for hidden treasures, who rejoice exceedingly and are glad when they find the grave? Why is light given to a man whose way is hidden, whom God has hedged in? For my sighing comes instead of my bread, and my groanings are poured out like water. For the thing that I fear comes upon me, and what I dread befalls me. I am not at ease, nor am I quiet; I have no rest, but trouble comes.”

Not surprisingly, Job is questioning why. But notice how he does this. He doesn't ask, “Why me?” or, “Why this?” Instead he asks things like, “*Why was I not as a hidden stillborn child?*”

For some reason, he isn't wondering just about the recent calamities; he's thinking in terms of having his whole life erased. He longs for the rest of the grave. It's as if he thinks the recent events are inevitably coupled with the rest of his life. Then he gets more specific. “*Why is light given to him who is in misery, and life to the bitter in soul, who long for death, but it comes not, and dig for it more than for hidden treasures, who rejoice exceedingly and are glad when they find the grave? Why is light given to a man whose way is hidden, whom God has hedged in?*”

Light here just means life. Job is asking, “Why create a life of misery? Why not just leave the whole thing out?”

This is the basic question of the book – the question that draws people to Job in the first place. It's why folks say, “I don't understand Job.”

For now, just note that Job has raised the question in a remarkably unselfish way. Despite his legendary misery, he's asking about this in the abstract. He recognizes that this is a question about God's agenda and he wondering how his life story could make sense.

While Job's words are not a prayer – he's just thinking out loud – it's a useful model for prayer. “But isn't he questioning God?”

Absolutely! He has questions. What's he supposed to do, suppress them because God doesn't like people to be good students? Great professors love hard questions.

Robot students are boring.

4 Job 4:1-11 (ESV)

Then Eliphaz the Temanite answered and said:

“If one ventures a word with you, will you be impatient? Yet who can keep from speaking? Behold, you have instructed many, and you have strengthened the weak hands. Your words have upheld him who was stumbling, and you have made firm the feeble knees. But now it has come to you, and you are impatient; it touches you, and you are dismayed. Is not your fear of God your confidence, and the integrity of your ways your hope?”

“Remember: who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off? As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same. By the breath of God they perish, and by the blast of his anger they are consumed. The roar of the lion, the voice of the fierce lion, the teeth of the young lions are broken. The strong lion perishes for lack of prey, and the cubs of the lioness are scattered.”

Eliphaz’s advice is off the mark. Job’s trials are not the result of any specific sin on his part. He means well, but Eliphaz is definitely not helping.

There’s a lesson for us in this. Notice how Eliphaz sounds like he’s talking to his pastor. *“Behold, you have instructed many, and you have strengthened the weak hands.”* His advice to Job is, in some ways, analogous to the advice we give to our church leaders.

One of the toughest aspects of being a pastor is dealing with a steady stream of feedback on just about everything. We mean well, and our words are generally lightyears better than Eliphaz’s, but with so many people offering advice it can still get draining.

This wouldn’t be a problem if we gave out complements as often as we give out criticism. But our natural tendency is to only transmit the things we think are important – the things with substance – and those are often suggestions.

We tend to make the same mistake in our marriages, but we’ve been taught to correct for this natural tendency in that context. So, we make a point of complementing our spouses (or should!)

We need to do that with our pastors. Constructive criticism is important, but complements should vastly outnumber criticisms. The same holds for other church workers.

Everyone needs encouragement, and those Satan would destroy need it more.

The same rule applies to prayer. We often forget the spiritual warfare aspect of church. In Job, it’s obvious that everything is about spiritual warfare. But we don’t usually think of the church as a field of war.

It is never anything else. Pray for your pastors. Pray for your church. Pray for all your church staff and volunteers.

Do not take this lightly. It’s called warfare for a reason.

5 Job 4:12-5:7 (ESV)

“Now a word was brought to me stealthily; my ear received the whisper of it. Amid thoughts from visions of the night, when deep sleep falls on men, dread came upon me, and trembling, which made all my bones shake. A spirit glided past my face; the hair of my flesh stood up. It stood still, but I could not discern its appearance. A form was before my eyes; there was silence, then I heard a voice: ‘Can mortal man be in the right before God? Can a man be pure before his Maker? Even in his servants he puts no trust, and his angels he charges with error; how much more those who dwell in houses of clay, whose foundation is in the dust, who are crushed like the moth. Between morning and evening they are beaten to pieces; they perish forever without anyone regarding it. Is not their tent-cord plucked up within them, do they not die, and that without wisdom?’

“Call now; is there anyone who will answer you? To which of the holy ones will you turn? Surely vexation kills the fool, and jealousy slays the simple. I have seen the fool taking root, but suddenly I cursed his dwelling. His children are far from safety; they are crushed in the gate, and there is no one to deliver them. The hungry eat his harvest, and he takes it even out of thorns, and the thirsty pant after his wealth. For affliction does not come from the dust, nor does trouble sprout from the ground, but man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward.”

Seriously Eliphaz? This is what you think Job needs to hear right now? The poor guy has lost all his children. He has *loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head*. He’s sitting in ashes, so beat down that you didn’t even recognize him at first. You can see that he has *a piece of broken pottery with which to scrape himself while he sits in the ashes*.

So, after a whole week without saying a word, he finally speaks and you take that as a cue to give him a lecture on abstract theology. Good grief. Here’s a suggestion.

“Job, I’m here for you. What can I do to help?”

We are always qualified to offer comfort and prayer. We are not always qualified to offer counsel. Many times I have stupidly offered advice when encouragement and prayer were what was needed.

Generally, that was when I had incomplete information. The times when my advice was useful were when it was asked for and the asker made sure I had all the facts.

Unless you’ve just been through a very similar experience, you can’t understand someone’s pain. Even if you have, how it affected you may have been different. It takes a lot of listening to get up to speed on someone else’s pain.

And they need someone else to listen long enough that they can truly empathize. So, the most important thing is often just being there. Praying for someone is important, but knowing what to pray for is important too.

Who do you know that’s in pain? Are they getting comfort from the Christian community?

Show up. Chat. Be there. Listen. Pray.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Do you know what your spiritual gifts are? Have you ever taken a survey designed to find them out?
2. What should a real friend do when someone is hurting? Grieving? Everyone brings food. That's OK – but just OK. We all feel incompetent to try something more significant. How can we do more?
3. If Jeremiah's whining is OK, then obviously crying out to God is OK too. What isn't OK? Where do you draw the line?
4. How can we encourage our pastors? How can we pray for them?
5. How can you tell when people just want wordless encouragement?

Items for prayer: