Course Study Guide

OT221
Lamentations-Job: God's Path Through Pain

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Updated 2014

Our Daily Bread Christian University

Lesson 1 Study Guide

OT221
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Lamentations & Esther: What God's People Do When the Bottom Drops Out of Life

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Objectives

This session shows God at work. In Lamentations He works as judge and disciplinarian. In Esther, He works as guardian and vindicator. Though Lamentations is a lament over Jerusalem's destruction and her citizens' exile, and Esther is a story of God's deliverance from destruction in that exile, both center on God's intimate involvement in preserving a holy people because of His covenant promises to them.

When you complete this lesson, "Lamentations & Esther: What God's People Do When the Bottom Drops Out of Life," you should be able to:

- Describe how a godly person responds to pressure and tragedy.
- Explain why some of God's people chose to stay in exile rather than return to freedom.
- Increase your confidence in God's ability to use pain and pressure to perfect His people.

Scripture Reading

Read the Book of Lamentations and the Book of Esther.

Transcript

Course Title: Lamentations-Job: God's Path Through Pain

Lesson One: Lamentations and Esther: What God's People Do When the Bottom Drops Out of Life

I. Introduction

In this segment of our course, we look at two books that come from the time of the exile. One is Lamentations, the other is Esther. Lamentations is from the year that Jerusalem fell, 586 B.C., or we believe it is at least close to that time; whereas, Esther is one of the last biblical books—the story about a people who did not return from exile, who did not follow the lead of Zerubbabel or Jeshua or Ezra or Nehemiah. Looking first at Lamentations, we will see a reaction to the destruction of Jerusalem; and then turning later to Esther, we will see how the Jews who did not return from exile survived and enjoyed God's blessing.

II. Lamentations

Lamentations is a book that has in it basically what its name suggests—it has laments. Lamentations is a poetical book; the whole book is poetry. It is five chapters worth of rather elaborate, rather lengthy poems that bemoan the terrible tragedy that was represented by having Jerusalem—the capital of Israel, the city that David had captured from the local Canaanites and had made to be the centerpiece of his empire, the city that God had caused His name to dwell in, in fulfillment of His promises in the book of Deuteronomy, the city where Solomon had built the temple, where the people of God had worshiped for so many centuries—which as of 586 B.C., lay in ruins.

A. Structure of the Book

The five chapters of the book of Lamentations are really five individual poems, because they are each structured a little bit differently but they all are talking about the same kind of thing. In addition to their being poetic in general, they also have a special feature; that is, they are acrostic. Now acrostic poetry is the kind of poetry that goes through the alphabet. An acrostic poem starts with A and tells you something that begins with the letter A, and then the next verse perhaps starts with B and tells you something that begins with the letter B, and so on. An acrostic would be a little like this: Awful was the time when our city was destroyed; Bad were those days in which we lived after the siege and the conquest and the death of so many of our loved ones; Crummy was our existence as a people in those hard times (continuing down through the alphabet).

B. Hebrew Pattern

Now, of course, in Hebrew, which the book of Lamentations was written in, you go through the Hebrew alphabet. It has twenty-two letters in its alphabet, not twenty-six like English. There are twenty-two parts to each chapter of the book of Lamentations. In the case of the first two chapters, you get three poetic couplets making up each verse. The first part of the first poetic couplet of the three starts with a new letter of the alphabet, so all of the poetic couplets that make up verse 1 or chapter 1:1 start with the Hebrew equivalent of the letter A. The one A at the beginning covers for all three. The same thing with verse 2: the Hebrew equivalent of the letter B begins that rather long verse, and all three couplets follow after that one instance of the letter B, and so on. It is an acrostic pattern in which you end up with twenty-two verses.

The same essential pattern comes with chapter 2. Then in chapter 3, the acrostic actually triples. So what happens now is that there are, again, three poetic couplets making up each section of material, but three of them each begin with the Hebrew equivalent of the letter A, and the letter B, and so on. In chapter 3, you have sixty-six verses because you have A, A, A and B, B, B and C, C, C, and so on. With chapter 4, there is a slackening of the intensity of the acrostic. In chapter 4, it is still going through the Hebrew alphabet, but now there are only two couplets, two poetic groupings, in each verse. And with chapter 5, the last chapter of the book, there are twenty-two verses still, but now not even in alphabetical order. It is no longer A, B, C, D, E, F. It is now A and G and W and L; it is all mixed up.

C. Structure Parallels Emphasis

Thus, what we observe is that the book in its structure parallels the book in its emphasis. What is that emphasis? It is going through all the miseries that God has brought upon the people of Judah, and specifically upon the city of Jerusalem and its inhabitants. So the woes, the trials, the sufferings, the hardships, the discouragement, the despair—all of that is described in verse after verse, kind of through the alphabet, telling you how bad it was. It reaches a height in chapter 3, a kind of intensity where there is the triple acrostic pattern. Then it begins to lessen off and drop in chapter 4, where it is just two couplets per verse; and then by chapter 5 the book kind of dies out in a whimper. There are twenty-two verses suggesting the total number of letters in the alphabet, but not even in alphabetical order. It is as if the city of Jerusalem and its people are so tired, so weary, so drained of their strength, that they can hardly even gasp out the miseries that they experienced.

D. Six Elements of Hebrew Lament Poetry

But as we said, this is a lament, and in the Hebrew Bible, a lament is not hopelessness. A lament is not a pattern in poetry in which you just say "we are gone, we are done, and we are through." A lament is actually a special type of poem that takes you through suffering but also expresses hope. In a lament, there are six elements: (1) There is the address; that is, you are praying to God. This is a kind of a prayer, the book of Lamentations. God is the one addressed. (2) There is the complaint. This is the section where the miseries are described. In

Lamentations, ninety-five percent of the material is a complaint; it is describing in all kinds of ways, kind of ringing in the changes on the ways that the people suffered in the siege and the fall of the great city of Jerusalem from 588 to 586 B.C. (3) Then there is an expression of trust. All these laments have some expression of trust in them. Where God can be trusted, He has been faithful; and therefore the implication is that He will be faithful again. There is a hope factor, in other words. (4) There is also a plea for deliverance. Lamentations is asking God where are You? Will You help us? Will You come to us? Will You please work out your plan on our behalf? We have suffered so much at the hands of our conquerors, the Babylonians. (5) There is, as well, the word of assurance. Sometimes it is brief, sometimes it is lengthy, and there is, indeed, assurance in the book of Lamentations. In the midst of all the descriptions of sufferings, you do not want to slip by and miss the encouragement. (6) Then there is finally the testimonial. There is the commitment to praise God in the future, to honor Him, to thank Him, and to bless Him for the deliverance He will provide.

E. Rapid Change in Topics

One interesting feature of laments in the Bible (and we have many of them in the book of Psalms, and some of them in the Prophets, and here a whole book devoted to that particular poetic style) is that the laments move from one element to another without warning. So you can go from the address to the complaint part, or from the trust to the deliverance plea, or from the assurance to the praise part, without warning. The writer does not say, "Now having spent some time talking about the great suffering, let us talk about our hope that we have in the Lord." No warning is given; it just comes. It comes in the same way that a commercial comes when you are watching a TV program. People in ancient Israel were used to those changes and expected them in the same way that we are not shocked when we are watching a drama on television and somebody is suddenly advertising popcorn. It does not bother us, and we are used to that kind of interruption. They were used to the rapid transitions that are found in a book like Lamentations.

F. Examples of Rapid Transitions

At the height of the misery, at the height of the portion that we call the complaint portion of the lament in chapter 3, we can read words like this: "Like a bear lying in wait, like a lion in hiding, he dragged me ("he" being God and "me" being the city personified in this poem) from the path and mangled me. He left me without help. He drew his bow and made me the target of his arrows. He pierced my heart . . . I became the laughing stock of all my people; they mock me in song all day long. He has filled me with bitter herbs and sated me with gall (a reference to something that the Psalms also mention in terms of the way it can seem that God has abandoned someone, and of course that language also is applied to Christ in the New Testament). He has broken my feet with gravel; he has trampled me in the dust. I have been deprived of peace; I have forgotten what prosperity is."

This is the language of the people of Judah and of Israel, and of Jerusalem, its capital—the capital of that people personified for us. "I remember my affliction and my wandering, the

bitterness and the gall (again that language). I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me. Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope (sudden transition to trust and assurance): Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, 'The Lord is my portion; therefore, I will wait for him.' The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord."

G. Yet All Is Not Lost

Then after that, verse after verse, chapter after chapter of misery, we must remember it is not a hopeless pattern. It is a pattern in which those who suffer are invited to express their sadness and their sorrow. Thus, a book like Lamentations serves for us as a kind of example of the way that one can be honest with God. One can bring before God one's complaints, what one really feels in suffering. When things are tough, you can tell God. But, it is not because you think He will not help you that you go on and on about what you are experiencing; it is precisely because you know He is the only one you can turn to with any hope.

So the book ends in its kind of whimpering fashion at chapter 5 with these words: "You, O Lord, reign forever; your throne endures from generation to generation. Why do you always forget us? Why do you forsake us so long? Restore us to yourself, O Lord (there, the plea for deliverance), that we may return; renew our days as of old unless you have utterly rejected us or are angry with us beyond measure." Had God utterly rejected His people? Was He angry with them beyond measure? To those who did not know His Word, His promises, the words of hope and prediction of the future that He had given through His prophets, some might have thought so; but it was not that way at all.

Lamentations does describe for us the bitterness of suffering through the beginnings of God's great covenant punishment, the Exile, but it certainly was not the end. The book looks forward, in fact, with hope to the way that God—who does reign forever, whose throne endures from generation to generation—will respond to the plea: "Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may return; renew our days as of old." God had great things in store for His people. The year 586 B.C. was not the end of the history of Israel.

III. Esther: Queen of Persia

A. Setting

Now then, we turn to Esther. Esther is from a time much later, a century and a half or more later, during the days of Xerxes, one of the kings at the end of the fifth century B.C. It was the desire of most Jews who had been taken into captivity by the Babylonians to return when they could. When the Persians gave them that opportunity, many did. Indeed, wave after wave of people returned; and as late as 70, 80, 90 years after the original captivity, we see people returning. We see them returning more than a century after the original captivity, led by people like Ezra and Nehemiah. But there were some who did not. They did not return sometimes

out of callousness, sometimes because they no longer had the faith to return. Some Jews, in Babylonian captivity, did not return because they were doing so well; some had succeeded.

Jeremiah had been inspired to tell the people to "settle down, build houses, pray for the blessing of God on the towns and cities where you are exiled to, make friends there. You are going to be there for a long time." Some of them did that so well that when the time came to return to Judah they were not very interested, especially of course the generations that were born in Mesopotamia, in the territory of the Babylonian Empire. To many of them, Judah was something that their parents or grandparents had talked about, but was not a place where they were at home. They were growing up in their country, their part of the world, their region, and that region was one part or another of the Babylonian Empire, and then successively after 540 B.C. when the Babylonian Empire fell to the Persians, one or another part of the Persian Empire. The story of Esther tells us about such people. There were Jews in various locations within the Persian Empire and Esther is one of them; and her uncle, Mordecai, another key figure in this interesting, fascinating story, is another.

B. A Too-Shy Queen?

The story begins in chapter 1 with a description of how King Xerxes is dissatisfied with his queen, Vashti. At a drunken-fest he wants to display her, to show her off to the crowd. She is offended and refuses. Is this because she is shy in public? No, probably because he wanted to display her in a debauched way, some kind of display with not all her clothes on or the like. She refuses and he and his drunken nobles say, "Hey, if women do this kind of thing, what will be next?"

So he is no great example, but the decision is made to find another wife. Now, in the meantime, this king tries out a new woman every night, which was the system—not very admirable. He is no model for any of us to follow, but it was the system that he used. There was a sense in the ancient world that sexual prowess was somehow especially supposed to be manifested in kings. One way they could show they were fit to reign was by going to bed with a different woman every night. King Xerxes did that, and that was his practice.

Esther, a rather secularized Jew, was brought into the potential harem of the king and wanted to please the king. She wanted to be a success. So following the advice of the harem keepers, she, when her time finally came to spend her night with the king, impressed him and he liked her. He decided to make her his queen. She ends up in chapter 2 coming to be chosen as the replacement for, in the king's eyes, somewhat uppity Queen Vashti.

C. Threats

In chapter 2 of the book, we read about a plot. This plot is overheard by Esther's uncle, Mordecai. It is a plot that some of the rather prominent individuals in the capital city of Susa had to kill King Xerxes, an assassination plot. Mordecai, aware of this, gets word to Esther about it. Esther agrees to intercede to prevent that from happening. Meanwhile, the plot

thickens with the introduction of a character named Haman. This individual, Haman, is one of the king's nobles; he is very wealthy, thinks very highly of himself, and wants to be honored at all times.

The Jews felt that it was improper for them to bow down to various individuals because that would be showing allegiance to those individuals over God (by the time of Esther and Mordecai, that may have been more custom than deep religious sentiment). But Mordecai refuses to bow down, to get on the ground with his face to the ground, and honor Haman when he passes by. Haman, noticing this and aware that Mordecai is a prominent Jew, decides that he is going to get back at all the Jews; he is not going to have that kind of thing. If this Jew can do that, the way to solve that is to get rid of Jews in general.

Haman begins to plot against the Jews. So you have, on the one hand, the plot against the king that is discovered by a Jew; and you have, on the other hand, a plot against a Jew by a prominent noble. Even though Mordecai, in effect, has saved the king's life, no particular reward is given him. The press of business in the empire is such that the king does nothing for Mordecai originally. Then as time passes, we know that Haman increasingly goes after Mordecai; and while that is happening, King Xerxes suddenly realizes that a huge amount of time has passed. He has not done anything for the guy who discovered that plot and turned in the perpetrators so that they could be appropriately punished.

D. Rewards

King Xerxes says in chapter 6, "We have got to do something for this guy Mordecai." And he begins to ask around, "What should we do for someone the king really has taken a delight in, someone who pleases the king?" Haman, in his self-centeredness, his arrogance, thinks, "It has got to be me. I am the one he is planning to honor." He suggests the kinds of honors that should be given to such a person, and then the king does them for Mordecai. Haman is furious and betrays himself as no real friend of the king, as an enemy of the Jews, and one who, in fact, has all along been in it for himself and not for the empire.

So he gets hanged in chapter 7 on the very gallows that he had caused to be built, thinking that they would be used for a public hanging of this man that in his obsession he had made his enemy, Mordecai. Now one of the things that Haman had managed to accomplish was an edict, an edict from the government that the Jews could be attacked, that the Jews were enemies. Now this was the kind of paranoia that can get going a lot of times—it was not just against Jews. There are many times in history where governments have joined in supporting the paranoia of people against one ethnic group or another. But in this case, Haman had stirred up hatred against the Jews in general and had gotten the government edict issued; and a difficulty was that in the law of the Medes and Persians, you could not revoke laws. They felt that if they were going to make laws, you could not just have them last for a while until some king decided he did not like them, and so those laws stood.

E. Edicts

How then were the Jews to be protected if an edict had gone out that on a certain day their enemies could attack them? Well, the answer is you warn the Jews and tell them that it is coming and you allow them to arm themselves and be ready for the attacks. That is what we see described in chapters 8-9 of the book. The Jews triumph: they are ready for their attackers; they are on guard. And so, in fact, all of those in the empire who hate the Jews take advantage of this edict—"If you would like to, go attack a Jew"—are able to do in their enemies, and thus eliminate opposition for themselves, and have much greater security than they had, in fact, before the edict was issued in the first place.

This story is the origin of a Jewish festival that came over time to be celebrated called the Feast of Purim. In this feast, children even regard Haman as a sort of boogieman and remember Esther and Mordecai. In chapter 10, where the book ends, Mordecai's successes and favor and elevation are described for us, along with those of Esther.

F. Conclusion

One interesting factor about this book, it never even mentions the name of God. Not because God is not behind the event, not because God does not love His people and care for them, but because these Jews are quite secularized. They are not talking God's language as it were, but it does not mean that God does not love them. Yes, there are accommodations; yes, they are fitting into the Persian Empire; and no, they are not among those who returned following the advice of the prophets. But they are still God's people. He still loves them and cares for them, wants His best for them, and protects them; and His protection is with them as the book of Esther draws to a close.

Discussion Questions

How would you respond to someone who says that the "lamenting" found in the book of Lamentations is not an appropriate spiritual expression for Christians?

How would you respond to someone who says that the book of Esther shouldn't be included in the Bible since it never mentions the name of God?

What positive character traits does Esther exhibit and how does she demonstrate those qualities?

Further Study

Suggested reading for this lesson:

Stedman, Ray C. *Adventuring Through the Bible*: *A Comprehensive Guide to the Entire Bible*. 2nd ed. Discovery House Publishers: 2012.
Read Chapter 32: "God's Therapy" (Lamentations) and Chapter 22: "The Courage of the Queen" (Esther)

Philip Yancey Devotional
In Shock - Lamentations 3:1-40

"Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness" (Lam. 3:22-23).

"I am the man who has seen affliction . . ." this chapter begins, and that doleful sentence captures this entire book. Judah's king is now shackled and blinded, his princes slaughtered. Jerusalem—the capital city, the holy city—is no more. The poet writes this book in a state of dazed grief. He wanders the empty streets, piled high with corpses, and tries to make sense of a tragedy that defies all comprehension.

But beyond the human tragedy, a different kind of distress gnawed at the author. Babylonian soldiers had entered the temple—pagans in the Most Holy Place!— looted it, then burned it to the ground. The dream of the covenant died on that day. Historians record that as the Babylonians entered the temple, they swept the empty air with their spears, seeking the unseen Jewish God. But they found nothing. God had given up; He had fled the premises. Jews still mourn the event: Each year on the anniversary of the day the temple was destroyed, the Orthodox read the book of Lamentations aloud.

The tone of this anonymous book may sound familiar, for the prophet Jeremiah is the likely author. He is an old man, with shriveled skin and broken bones. He has been hunted, jailed, tortured, thrown in a pit, and left for dead. Yet nothing can match the grief he feels now as he stares, not at his own wounds, but at the gaping wounds of Jerusalem.

God is an enemy, the prophet concludes, in an outburst familiar to any reader of Jeremiah. He lets his venom spill out. And yet, in the middle of this dark chapter, the author remembers what he once learned about God in brighter, happier times. He recalls the goodness of God, the love, and the compassion. In the midst of this bleak book come words that a writer later crafted into a hymn: "Great Is Thy Faithfulness." At the moment of terrible tragedy, those qualities of God may seem very far away, but where else can we turn? As Lamentations shows, without God's hope, there is no hope.

Life Question: In your darkest times, do your thoughts turn to God? What helps you find relief?

Glossary

Acrostic — A series of lines or verses whose initial, final, or other identifiable letters form a word, a phrase, the initial letters of a phrase, or the alphabet. Acrostics in the Hebrew Old Testament include all or part of Psalms 2; 9-10; 25; 34; 37; 111; 112; 119; 145; Proverbs 31:10-31; Nahum 1:2-10; and most of the book of Lamentations.

Hebrew Language — The language in which the Old Testament was written except for 268 verses in Aramaic (Da 2:4-7:28; Ezr 4:8-6:18; 7:12-26; Jer 10:11). Both Hebrew and Aramaic belong to the Semitic family of languages. The Hebrew language, like Phoenician, Aramaic, and Arabic, is written from right to left. Unlike English, which includes vowels in its twenty-six letter alphabet, the Hebrew alphabet consists of twenty-two consonantal sounds or phones. A system of vowels was added in medieval times.

Lament — To express sorrow or mourning. In form-critical studies, the terms dirge (funeral song) and complaint are more precise than lament.

Providence — Literally means "foresight," but is generally used to denote God's preserving and governing all things by means of second causes (Ps 18:35; 63:8; Ac 17:28).

Susa — A city in ancient Persia, one of the three royal cities of the Achaemenian kings. The ruins of this great city lie about 125 miles north of the Persian Gulf in the ancient province of Susiana, called Khuzistan or "the country of the Elamites."

Xerxes I — Greek name for the son of Darius the Great and Atossa, the daughter of Cyrus the Great and sister of Cambyses. Xerxes was designated heir-apparent by his father and served as satrap of Babylon from 498 B.C. to his accession in 486 B.C. He reigned until 464 B.C. Most scholars agree that King Ahasuerus (Est 1:1) was Xerxes I. The Hebrew Ahasuerus corresponds to the Persian form of his name, Khshayarsha.

Quiz

1. In the end, the character Haman in the story of Esther:
   A. Is successful in his plot against the Jews
   B. Is kind to the Jews
   C. Is rewarded by the king
   D. Is executed

2. Lamentations was written to mourn:
   A. The destruction of Jerusalem
   B. The destruction of Samaria
   C. Life in the exile
   D. All of the above

3. Some Jews didn't return to the Promised Land:
   A. Because of a lack of faith
   B. Because they had become attached to their new home
   C. Because they had become successful
   D. All of the above

4. The acrostic poetry in Lamentations:
   A. Forms a word
   B. Forms a phrase
   C. Goes through the Hebrew alphabet
   D. All of the above

5. The book of Lamentations is actually:
   A. Four individual poems
   B. Five individual poems
   C. Six individual poems
   D. Two long poems

6. The Hebrew alphabet has:
   A. 26 consonants and vowels
   B. 26 consonants
   C. 22 consonants and vowels
   D. 22 consonants

7. The name of the Persian king in the book of Esther is:
   A. Xerxes
   B. Artaxerxes
   C. Darius
   D. Cyrus

8. The Old Testament lament form included:
   A. An opening greeting
   B. A blessing
   C. A complaint
   D. A call to wailing

9. The story of the book of Esther is the origin of the Jewish celebration called:
   A. Hanukkah
   B. The Feast of Dedication
   C. The Feast of Purim
   D. The Festival of Lights

10. Ultimately, a Hebrew lament was an expression of:
   A. Hopelessness
   B. Hope
   C. Anger
   D. Praise

Answers: 1. D 2. A 3. D 4. C 5. B 6. D 7. A 8. C 9. C 10. B

Lesson 2 Study Guide

OT221
Lamentations-Job: God's Path Through Pain

Job: How a Good Person Grew Through His Suffering

Updated 2014

Our Daily Bread Christian University

Objectives

This study demonstrates deep faith in action. Job's torment took him to the brink of cynicism. This journal of his deep – and real – struggle to maintain his trust in God when he thought God had turned against him provides an essential study for real people living and ministering for God in a real world.

When you complete this lesson, "Job: How a Good Person Grew Through His Suffering," you should be able to:

- Explain why Job appeared to suffer so unjustly.
- Describe how NOT to help someone in their time of suffering.
- Form convictions for survival and for ministering in suffering.
- Deepen your appreciation for cultivating a functioning faith in God.

Scripture Reading

Read the Book of Job.

Transcript

Course Title: Lamentations-Job: God's Path Through Pain

Lesson Two: Job: How a Good Person Grew Through His Suffering

I. Introduction

The book of Job is a great old book that has intrigued people ever since it was written. It is a book rich in its textures. It is a book of wisdom that talks about how a person is supposed to live in a wicked world. It is a book that is not always easy to follow, and one reason for that is its structure. It has a prose introduction and a prose conclusion, but most of the book's 42 chapters are difficult Hebrew poetic discussions—dialogue back and forth with Job speaking, and then one of his so-called counselors speaking, and then Job giving a rejoinder, and then some other counselor making a point, and Job referring to that, and back and forth, and back and forth.

The discussion is at a high level. These are people speculating about whether life is fair or not; they are speculating about how God works in our world. They all agree that there is tragedy; they all agree there is suffering; they all agree there is hardship; they all agree there are pains and trials. But why did these things happen, and why is the world the way it is? Why is wickedness allowed by a good God to prevail? These are questions that they address in detail with impassioned arguments, with deep and long expressions of their opinions; and as their opinions work back and forth, one against the other, it is awfully easy for a reader to become confused.

We are going to try in this segment of our course to see the basics of the book of Job and to provide some guidelines for reading through the book. It is really a wonderful book. It is, as we have said, a book of wisdom. Wisdom is the ability to make choices in life, and of course, the right choices are always the choices that reflect God's will. Those are the choices we want to make. Job wanted to make them, and yet in the midst of his suffering—which he understood to be suffering that he did not deserve—it became very difficult for him to decide how to make the right choices. What were his choices in life?

II. Job's Dilemma (1:1-2:13)

A. Prologue

Job's suffering, we learn in the prologue in chapters 1 and 2, the prose prologue, is the result of a kind of contest. God, in His supervision of the principalities and powers of this earth, confronts Job, and He confronts Job by Satan. How does He do it? In a conversation with Satan, God says, "Have you considered my servant Job?" Satan says, in effect, "Oh sure, he loves You and serves You and does Your will, and is generous and kind and all of that—as long as You have given him a healthy life, a lovely family, plenty of wealth and comfort. But you know, if You would give him over to me, I could make his life so miserable that he would actually curse

You, God." So God says, "All right, I will give him over to you."

Thus, Job is confronted with a terrible set of miseries. Disasters of various kinds come on his family—he loses everything, and his children are gone. He and his wife are bereft of them, and his wealth is gone and all the things that he owned either die off or are destroyed in one kind of disaster or another. He himself becomes horribly sick, and he is pained with boils and sores all over his body. It is a terrible time.

His wife actually says to him unwittingly the very thing that would have caused Satan to win the contest. She says, "Curse God and die." She does not necessarily mean by that that she hates God and Job should too. It is just that they believed in those days that if a person were to go so far as to curse God, God would kill him. So she is saying, "Give up." She is discouraged, she is beaten, she is forlorn. Job says, "No, I will not." Now Job does not know about the contest. He does not know that God has confidence he will come through his suffering without cursing Him, without giving up, without just saying, "I hate You God; may bad things happen to You; go kill me." That sets the scene.

B. Overview of the Book

Then, after that prose introduction, with chapter 3 we begin what are called the dialogues of the book. There are three cycles of dialogues; that is, Job will speak, and then one of his comforters will speak (comforters Bildad, Zophar, and Eliphaz), and then Job will speak again, and one of them, and so on. This goes around basically three times, so there are lengthy speeches. Then in chapter 28, there is a wisdom interlude. Chapter 28 is not part of the dialogues; it is kind of a center of the book. If you are aware of it and do not just think it is a continuation of somebody's speech, you will realize that its words are profoundly helpful to you because it asks the question, "Where is wisdom to be found? Where do you get it?" The answer is: It is found with God. The person who turns to the Lord, who seeks Him, who studies His Word, is the person who finds wisdom, who knows how to make the right decisions in this life, who knows what life is all about, who is really clued in to how a human being should live on this earth.

Following the wisdom interlude, there are three monologues. Job speaks, then the reader sort of expects that another one of Job's comforters will, perhaps, come on and say something in response to Job. But this time a new character comes on the scene. His name is Elihu. We have not heard from him before. When Elihu arrives, there are some things that he says that, in effect, rebuke Job's comforters; and there are some things that he says that rebuke Job. It looks like the best Job is going to get is the words of Elihu, words that are ultimately very critical.

Then, suddenly, God appears; and for five chapters, chapters 38-42, God speaks to Job. That is very important. God actually addresses this person He has allowed to suffer so much. With chapter 42, we read Job's closing poetic words of contrition. Then comes the prose epilogue. In that epilogue we learn how, as a result of God's continuing mercy to Job, everything is restored to him—new children are born, and his wealth is given once again, and he is allowed to have

good health, and other sorts of prosperity come to him. This was not as a full compensation, it seems, for everything he has endured, but as an evidence of the kindness and love of God for His servant.

III. Job Laments and Debates (3:1-37:24)

That overview does not tell the whole story, because the story really takes place in the dialogues in which Job and the others debate the question, "How do you live in a wicked world? Is life fair? Is the kind of thing that has happened to Job something that he deserves?" So let us take a look in greater detail at those dialogues. Follow along as we summarize quickly what is contained in each chapter. It is a quick run-through, but if you are attentive you can appreciate the way the dialogue works.

A. Job's Lament (3:1-26)

Chapter 3 houses Job's initial words. This is what he says after all the suffering that he has been through, and after his wife has suggested to him that he just ought to curse God and die. He says what can be summarized in this way: "For the unhappy in this world, is it not better not to live at all or never to have lived in the first place?" In other words, if your life is full of suffering, if your life is characterized by hardship as his life now is, if it is more pain than joy, if it is more trial than delight, is it not better not to have lived? What good is living a suffering life? What good is living an unhappy life? That is Job's question, and that is what chapter 3 is about. This is called his opening lament. He lays out, as it were, before the world this question: Is life worth living when it is full of hardship? That is a good question. It is a question a lot of people have asked, and it has been answered a lot of different ways.

B. Eliphaz's First Proposal (4:1-5:27)

One of Job's acquaintances named Eliphaz comes on the scene with the meritorious desire of comforting Job. Eliphaz is not an enemy of Job in any way; he is a friend and he wants to help Job. But Eliphaz comes from a perspective that many people have, and that perspective is that a good God would never allow a good person to suffer unless the good person deserved to suffer. In other words, any kind of misery, any kind of suffering, any kind of disappointment in this life, is some sort of punishment. There is something wrong with your life if it is not going smoothly. This is the mentality that comes forward in the so-called "health and wealth" gospel that one sometimes hears about. The idea is that if you have the right faith and if you are living the right life, you ought to be doing well. You ought to be prospering, you ought not to be suffering from disease, and so on; and Eliphaz represents that.

In chapters 4-5, Eliphaz has a turn at discussing this problem. Here is a friend of his that has had almost every imaginable kind of suffering come his way, who is sitting in dust and ashes, miserable, in pain, sick—and he tries to help him. From his perspective, Job needs to get some correction from God, as Job needs to get right with God. It would not have happened unless he was on the outs with the Lord, so he explains to Job that basically you get what you deserve in

life. That is his message—of course implying that Job must have done something to deserve what he got. He also says that since God judges angels, surely He does the same with humans, doesn't He? And that is the way chapter 4 ends. If God is willing to judge angels (and the judgment of angels is a doctrine we see in Scripture with the fall of Satan to which Jesus refers, and so on), would not God judge humans? He is not going to let them go unjudged.

In chapter 5, his argument is: Do not be resentful; trust God to be fair; God is fair; that is His nature: for of course He is going to be fair. It ends with words that essentially can be summarized as simply this: God's correction is good for Job; God's correction is good for us—implying that these things that have happened are God's correction. We know that they are unusual. We know that Satan has been given powers to cause illness that he normally does not have. He has been given the power to cause various sorts of disasters, even bring about the events regarding the weather with storms and so on, things that Satan cannot typically do. God specially gave him those powers in connection with Job. But from Eliphaz's point of view, God had to have done it because something Job did displeased God. So he just wants Job to "fess up" and get right with God. How does Job respond?

C. Job's First Response to Eliphaz (6:1-7:21)

We read in chapters 6-7 Job's response. First, his misery is very real and he says, in effect: "I would like to die but not having cursed God. I do not want to just get killed by God, but I sure do not enjoy living anymore. I have done nothing wrong." Now that is quite a thing for Job to say. He does not mean that he is perfectly sinless and never did anything wrong, but he is saying, "I did not do anything to deserve this. My life is not the worst of the worst that would produce such extreme punishment that none of us has ever heard of before." In chapter 7, he says life is tough; he talks about the ways in which it is tough for many people, not just himself. Then he asks God at the end of chapter 7, not so much talking now to Eliphaz or any of the other comforters but to God Himself, "What have I done, God?"

D. Bildad's First Round of Advice (8:1-22)

It is now the turn in chapter 8 of another friend, Bildad. Now Bildad, just like Eliphaz, wants to help Job. He loves the guy and wants him to be encouraged and wants him to get free from these awful tortures that have come his way. We can summarize what he says in chapter 8 simply as, "Job, turn to God; He helps good people"—meaning of course, "You have not been good, you have been bad, but God will help you if you turn to Him." Turn to God; He helps good people. That is the essence of the message.

E. Job Replies to Bildad (9:1-10:22)

Well, Job does not find the advice to be helpful. He wants to know why God has done this, and that is not the answer. He knows it was not the answer, because he did nothing to offend God. So in chapter 9, Job begins by saying: "How might I argue with God? I would like to have a conversation with God on this. I would like to get to Him; I would like to find out what is wrong. Why is He doing this to me? How can things so inappropriate happen to someone who

has tried so hard to be righteous?" In chapter 10, he continues to ask by a lot of words that can be summarized in this way, "Why me, God?" And also, "Why this? Why such severe, awful suffering?"

F. Zophar's First Charge (11:1-20)

In chapter 11, a third so-called comforter comes on the scene. He also has the best intentions toward Job, and his message can be summarized very simply: "Job, repent. God will forgive you." Good advice if you need to repent, if what has happened to you is the result of your sin, but infuriating advice if it is not.

G. Job's Response to Zophar (12:1-14:22)

Job then responds in chapter 12; his response also continues in 13-14. He first makes the point, "I am worse off than many people who are evil. There really are evil people and you might argue they deserve disasters, but I am worse off than they are. Worse things have happened to me than any of us has ever known." In chapter 13, he says to Zophar, and also to the other comforters, "You cannot help me, but God could. God could help me. I want relief. I want to be able to plead my case directly with God. That is what would be satisfying."

Then addressing God predominantly in chapter 14, he says, "God, You have given man a miserable existence, haven't You?" Now by that, again, he does not mean that everybody suffers equally, but he has certainly come clear in his mind to the fact that many people do. He is really sensitive to the widespread suffering in this world, and he cannot understand why God has done it. What is God's purpose? How does it happen that so many people have to suffer? And though he does not know anybody who has suffered as much as he, he sure does wonder why they have to suffer.

H. Eliphaz's Second Speech (15:1-35)

In chapter 15, Eliphaz has a second chance, a second round. Now you know they have not gotten through to Job yet, so they start getting rather tough in their words, and Eliphaz says, "Job, you are a sinner. You are an impious doubter. You really do not put yourself on God's side. Don't you get it? It is the wicked who suffer."

I. Job's Second Response to Eliphaz (16:1-17:16)

Job responds in chapters 16-17, "You are no help. God has really afflicted me, but you are no help, are you?"

J. Bildad's Second Speech (18:1-21)

Bildad has a second chance, a second shot at Job. In chapter 18, he says, "Job, there is no future in being wicked"—presuming, of course, that Job's resistance to their arguments is proof that

he really did something wrong and is kind of fixed in his wickedness.

K. Job's Second Response to Bildad (19:1-29)

Job responds to him, too, in chapter 19: "My misery is great, but I deserve vindication. You deserve judgment." Now, of course, this is stated out of frustration and anger. But Job is really turning the tables on his comforters in saying, "You guys are wrong. You are seeing it the wrong way, and you need to be corrected."

L. Zophar's Second Speech (20:1-29)

In chapter 20, Zophar has a second chance. "Anything the wicked enjoy is only temporary." That is his message to Job, suggesting that Job has done something wicked, or many things wicked, and has been receiving punishment accordingly. "Their end is always terrible," he says, trying to paint a picture that Job will not like, but one that will hasten Job's repentance.

M. Job's Second Response to Zophar (21:1-34)

In chapter 21, Job responds: "The wicked often do well. It does not work that they get punished all the time. God should punish them, but He lets them do as well as the righteous. We all believe that God should punish the wicked and that the righteous should be rewarded. Why then does life work the way it works?" That is what Job was asking. It is a valid question; it is the kind of question we would ask under the circumstances, too.

N. Eliphaz's Third and Final Speech (22:1-30)

Eliphaz then has a third round. "A good God," he says in chapter 22, "would never punish a good human. He would help you if you would ever humbly pray for help." That is his message—God would not do this.

O. Job's Final Response to Eliphaz (23:1-24:25)

So, Job responds in chapters 23-24: "God's distance makes getting justice hard. Oh, I wish I could find out what is going on. He does not even seem to police the world; the evil fare just like other people do." Of course, Job is reflecting on the fact that there is a lot of wickedness in our world that God does not step in and eliminate instantly.

P. Bildad's Third and Final Argument (25:1-6)

Bildad has a third try. "Job," he says in chapter 25, "God is so good that none of us can be good compared to Him. Thus, by definition you deserve judgment. You are just not as good as God. That alone should allow you to think of yourself as worthy of punishment."

Q. Job's Final Response to Bildad (26:1-27:23)

Job says in chapter 26, "Some advice—God is all powerful. . . ." (in chapter 27) "But He has denied me justice. I know I am right, and I am not going to curse God, for God would then be justified in greatly punishing me."

R. Wisdom Interlude (28:1-28)

Then comes the wisdom interlude. At this point, we are reminded that if you want wisdom, you can find it only in fearing God.

S. Job's Reflections (29:1-31:40)

Following that, Job says in chapter 29, "I have been upright; I have lived a good life." Chapter 30 is a chronicling of his words in which he says, "Worthless people are making fun of me now. My hopes for life are dashed." He describes in chapter 31 the ways in which he was a righteous person and says, "If I had done this kind of evil or that kind of evil, sure, I would be deserving of judgment; but I did not do that." He protests his innocence.

T. Elihu's Charge (32:1-37:24)

Then comes Elihu, and his speech goes from chapter 32 to chapter 37. He says, "I am not partial to either side. Job, you are a sinner so 'fess up.' God is fair and Job is both rebellious and sinful." Now that is really essentially the same kind of thing that the three earlier comforters were saying. Then he says, "Do you think you can make God respond to you? God does what is fair. He is superior to us all—He controls nature; He is surely above and distant from answering your puny concerns." Well, it looks like that is all Job is going to get—rebuke, in that he does not have any right to ask why.

IV. Job's Deliverance

A. The Lord Speaks (38:1-40:2; 40:6-41:34)

Job responds in chapter 38-40, but only silently, because now God is talking and it continues into chapter 41. And finally, Job can blurt out the words that he says in 42, where he repents.

B. Job's Contrition (40:3-5; 42:1-6)

What is it that God says that causes Job to be satisfied enough to repent, to say, "I should not have questioned you" (in chapter 42)? What is it? What is it that produces that response? The answer is God appears and just says to Job things like this, "Did you, Job, create everything? Do you control nature? Do you control the hippopotamus or the crocodile? In other words, are you able to run things like I am? Do you know how to do things like I know how to do, like how to control this universe like I know how to control it?" You know, that breaks through to Job. It

is not an answer to every question that he had; it is not the solution to all of his musing about the nature of life. But, it is an important point—"Job, I know what I am doing. Do you realize that?" Then Job can say, "I repent; I should not have questioned you."

C. Epilogue (42:7-17)

We know that it was a contest, and that the contest glorified God. God won! God says at the end of the book to the comforters, "Ask Job, my servant, to pray for you, because my servant Job has spoken correctly." In other words, Job was right: this life is not fair; there is much wickedness in it. Obviously, the answer is that one should not look for fairness in this world but should look for it in God's arrival. When that comes, when that finally happens, when the end of things happen that parallel God's own special arrival into Job's presence. Then we will see action; then we will know.

But Job never really finds out why he was tested, but it did glorify God. You know, we never find out either. We do not know why some of us get cancer, why some of us die young, why some lives are taken in car accidents, or why some people lose financially, or some people, who seem to be very wicked and cheat and do all kind of not very savory things, seem to get ahead. But we do know that God knows exactly what He is doing, and that faithfulness always honors Him. We, who know Christ, know that in the final judgment all things will be set right, just as they really were for Job in the restoration part of the epilogue and as they will be for us, too.

Discussion Questions

What insights about suffering does the book of Job provide?

What does the book of Job teach about wisdom?

What does the book of Job teach about the nature of God?

Further Study

Suggested reading for this lesson:

Stedman, Ray C. *Adventuring Through the Bible: A Comprehensive Guide to the Entire Bible*. 2nd ed. Discovery House Publishers: 2012.
Read Chapter 24: "The Hardest Question" (Job)

Philip Yancey Devotional
Is God Unfair? - Job 1:1-2:10

"Does Job fear God for nothing? . . . . Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? . . . But stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face" (Job 1:9-11).

One book of the Bible is virtually ageless. It relates the story of Job, a rich patriarch who could have lived in Abraham's time, but whose story was probably reduced to this poetic form hundreds of years later, during Israel's literary Golden Age. Regardless, the book raises questions so urgent and universal that it speaks to every era.

Job's story centers around a question that haunted the Jews from the earliest days when they were first chosen as God's covenant people. Somehow, they expected better treatment. Job had the courage to voice the question aloud—Is God unfair?—and no one has asked that question more eloquently or profoundly.

The book seems meant to explore the outer limits of unfairness. Job, the most upright, outstanding man in all the earth, must endure the worst calamities. He suffers unbearable punishment, but for what? What has he done wrong?

The book reads like a detective story in which the readers know far more than the central characters. The very first chapter answers Job's main concern: He has done nothing to deserve such suffering. We, the readers, know that, but nobody tells Job and his friends. As the prologue reveals, Job was involved in a cosmic test, a contest proposed in heaven but staged on earth.

Satan had claimed that people love God only because of His good gifts. According to Satan, no one would ever follow God apart from some selfish gain. Of course, Job was blameless and upright; he was also rich and healthy. Remove those good things from Job's life, Satan challenged, and watch Job's faith melt away.

God's reputation is on the line in this book; it rests suspensefully on the response of a devastated, miserable man. Will Job continue to trust God, even as his world crashes down around him? Will he believe in a God of justice, even when life seems grotesquely unfair?

Life Question: When have you questioned, "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

Glossary

Buzite — A person of or from Buz. The geographic location is unknown.

Naamathite — A person of or from Naamah. A site in Edom or northwestern Arabia has been proposed, possibly in the vicinity of jebel el-Na`ameh.

Prose — A literary medium distinguished from poetry, especially by its greater irregularity and variety of rhythm and its closer correspondence to the patterns of everyday speech.

Satan — The Hebrew noun "satan" signifies an "adversary" in several texts (1Sa 29:4; 2Sa 19:22). The verb "satan" also means "accuse" or "resist" (Ps 38:20). As a proper noun it refers to the devil, a fallen angelic being (Nu 22; Job 1-2; 1Ch 21:1; Zec 3:1).

Shuhite — Probably a member of the tribe descended from Shuah, a son of Abraham by Keturah (Ge 25:2, 6). The geographic location is unknown.

Teman — A chief city and district of Edom. It was probably on or near the northern border of Edom. The residents of Teman were renowned for their wisdom (Jer 49:7; Ob 8).

Uz, land of — Although it cannot be known with certainty where it was located, evidence supports the conclusion that Job lived east of Edom in the Arabian Desert.

Wisdom — The ability to make right (i.e., godly) choices. A moral rather than an intellectual quality. To be "foolish" is to be godless (Ps 14:1).

Wisdom Literature — Name given to those ancient writings that deal primarily with human acquisition of knowledge about and mastery of life. Its explanations appeal to reason, experience, and human initiative, rather than to revelation and to divine initiative. In Jewish tradition, wisdom literature includes Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Ecclesiasticus, and the Wisdom of Solomon.

Quiz

1. How many cycles of dialogues are found in the book of Job?
   A. One
   B. Two
   C. Three
   D. Four

2. In essence, what did Job's wife say to him after so many terrible things happened to him?
   A. "I hate God and you should too."
   B. "Give praise to God—no matter what happens."
   C. "Give up and curse God, so that He can put you out of your misery."
   D. "You must have sinned for such terrible things to have happened."

3. Job's counselors were motivated by:
   A. Genuine concern for Job
   B. Disdain for Job
   C. An attitude of compromise
   D. Correct theology

4. Job's suffering is in reality the result of:
   A. His own sin
   B. His living in a fallen world
   C. The temptation of Job's family
   D. A kind of contest between God and Satan

5. Prose can be found:
   A. In the introduction of the book of Job
   B. In the main body of the book of Job
   C. In the interlude of the book of Job
   D. Throughout the book of Job

6. The book of Job is considered to be a book of:
   A. Prophecy
   B. History
   C. Prose
   D. Wisdom

7. The book of Job teaches that we should look for justice and fairness:
   A. In this world
   B. In God's arrival
   C. In our relationships with those who love us
   D. None of the above

8. The theme of the interlude in chapter 28 of the book of Job is:
   A. Wisdom
   B. Folly
   C. Judgment
   D. Justice

9. This message breaks through to Job and causes him to repent for questioning God:
   A. "Your suffering is indeed a result of your sin."
   B. "Your suffering was actually caused by Satan."
   C. "God is in control and knows what He is doing."
   D. "You will understand everything some day."

10. Who delivers the last monologue in the book of Job?
   A. Job
   B. God
   C. Elihu
   D. Eliphaz

Answers: 1. C 2. C 3. A 4. D 5. A 6. D 7. B 8. A 9. C 10. B