THE SUFFERINGS OF JOB
The Prologue (2:11—3:26)

The Arrival of Three Friends (2:11-13)

In time, three friends appeared to comfort Job after hearing of his disaster. Their appearance and the conversations that follow become the setting for the larger portion of the remainder of the book. His friends seem to have come some distance, Eliphaz from Teman (Teman is a local name for an area of Edom, cf. Je. 49:7, 20; Eze. 25:13; Am. 1:12; Ob. 8-9), Bildad from Shua (possibly to be connected to Shuah, the son of Abraham by Keturah, whom Abraham sent to the east, cf. Ge. 25:1-2, 6), and Zophar (in the LXX, Zophar was described as the king of the Mineans in southern Arabia, cf. Ge. 36:11, 15). To westerners, the arrival of friends who sit silently for a week might seem to be anything but comforting, but in the ancient Near East, this was the customary time for mourning the dead (cf. Ge. 50:10; 1 Sa. 31:13). His friends joined in the traditional rites of mourning, their lack of words an eloquent testimony to their shock, respect, and perhaps even awe at Job's crucible.

Job's Despair
watercolor by William Blake

JOB'S OPENING LAMENT (3)

Job finally broke the verbal silence, and his lament prefaces a series of lengthy poetic dialogues and soliloquies between him and his friends. Each speech (and there are no less than seventeen of them) is a complete piece-in-itself, though each interacts to greater or lesser degrees with the others. While no audience is described, the speeches often sound like arguments to an implied audience, and for us, the reader.

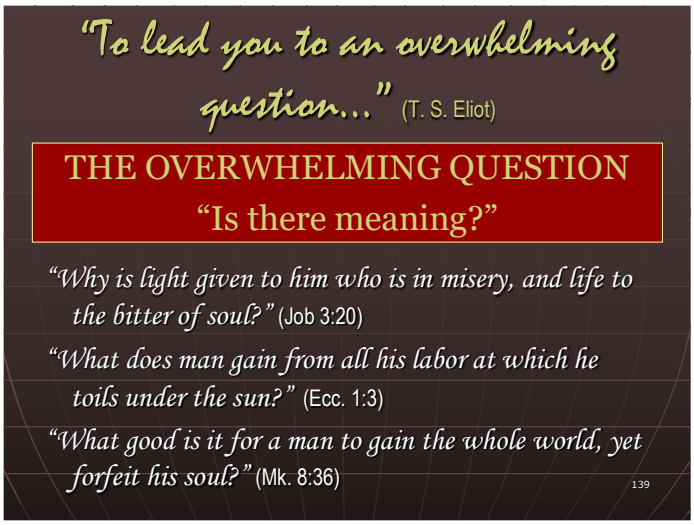
Job's speeches differ from those of his friends in one important aspect. His friends attempt to explain Job's dilemma and defend God, but they can only do so from an outsider's point of view. Job, for his part, speaks from the midst of his own crucible, where he tries to understand what has happened to him. Whereas his friends talk *about* God and *against* Job, Job often talks directly *to* God and sometimes even to himself as he grapples with his inability to hear from God, while struggling with the inexplicable disaster that has overtaken him. His friends are aloof and accusing; Job is passionate and bluntly honest. Still, in his search for God and meaning, he never lapses into materialistic regret because of the things he has lost. He is, if anything, entirely consistent. Job's concern is his seeming lost relationship with God, not his former wealth or health.

Job's opening lament falls into three sections, each probing the meaning of existence: a) if only I

had never been conceived, b) if only I had been still-born, and c) what meaning does my present existence now have? In these questions, Job is millennia ahead of the existentialists who asked the same probing question, "What does it mean to be?" which is to say, "What does it mean to exist?"[1] Like Jeremiah (cf. Je. 20:14-18), Job pronounced a curse[2] on the day of his conception and birth (3:1-10). Significantly, he does not curse God. Rather, he continues to demonstrate the falsity of the *satan's* cynicism![3] Still, the series of jussive verbs (3:3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9) reflect his despair and passionate anguish that he now lives in such abject misery. The poetic structure alternates between condemnations of the day and the night of his conception and birth, equally consigning both to be expunged from the calendar. Job wishes that the day of his birth had been swallowed up by the chaotic forces of Leviathan![4] Job is not suicidal, but his misery is so profound that he contemplates how much better it would have been had he never been born.

POETIC ELEMENTS

Since the dialogues between Job and his friends are poetic, they are replete with figures of speech and parallel lines, the latter of which is the quintessential character of Hebrew poetry. In the opening lament, the reader sees personification of the night (3:6, 7), the image of the "eyelids of the dawn" (בְּעַפְעַפֵּי־שָׁחַר), and the "double doors of the womb" (דַּלְתֵי בִטְנִי), which are typical poetic figures of speech (3:9-10). The latter two will come up later as well (cf. 38:8; 41:18). It is beyond the scope of this short series to address all the poetic structures and imagery, so here I will concentrate on the content more than the form of the poetry.



Job now transitions from curse to questioning, as he contemplates how much better it would have been had he been stillborn and not consigned to the wet-nurse (3:11-19).[5] Death at birth would have meant passing immediately

[1] From Jean Paul Sartre to T. S. Eliot, modern existential philosophers and thinkers have wrestled with this question. It is striking that these "modern" questions are not nearly so modern as often assumed, and Job asked the same kinds of questions long ago in the midst of his crucible.

[2] Unlike the earlier euphemisms that avoided juxtaposing the verb "to curse" with Yahweh as the object (cf. 1:11; 2:5, 9), here the verb קָלַל (= to curse) is allowed to stand, since Job is speaking of himself, not God.

[3] Both the prologue and epilogue of the book use the tetragrammaton יְהוָה (= Yahweh), but other than in 12:9, the middle chapters of the book exclusively use אֱלוֹהַּ (= God).

[4] Leviathan (לִוְיָתָן), the ancient Near Eastern primordial sea monster with seven heads, is familiar both from Ugaritic literature as well as the Hebrew Bible (cf. Ps. 74:14; Is. 27:1).

[5] The reference to being "received on the knees" (3:12) probably refers to either the mid-wife, grandmother, or perhaps, a wet nurse (cf. Ru. 4:16).

to the abode of the dead, where all the preeminent builders of society eventually go. While the Book of Job does not entertain ideas of heaven and hell or rewards and punishments in the afterlife (such ideas will not arise until later in the biblical revelation), it still suggests a continued existence, not extinction. Further, the inequities of the present life are resolved in death, princes with houses of wealth being no different than stillborn infants, and prisoners suffering under forced labor now at ease, slaves and masters, the small and the great, all on equal footing.

CONCEPTS OF AFTERLIFE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The concept of an afterlife develops only gradually in the Old Testament, reaching its greatest explanation in the New Testament in light of the resurrection of Christ. OT terms like "sheol" seem to refer to the abode of the dead, a place poetically described as having gates (38:17; cf. Is. 38:10), which speaks to the fact that once one arrives, there is no escape. Only by the time of the writing prophets, are there hints about a resurrected afterlife (Isa. 26:19; Da. 12:2).

The conclusion of his lament raises an even deeper question: "Is there meaning to life in the midst of unbearable suffering?" This is the point of Job's question, "Why is light given to him who is in misery—to the one who wishes to die but cannot?" Why, indeed? Job certainly does not entertain the modern questions of active euthanasia or physician-assisted suicide. He is not a quitter. He clearly understands that the issues of life and death are the domain of the Almighty. Still, he can see no way forward, no way to do anything meaningful. He can no longer even eat because of his intense suffering. What he feared the most—the loss of God's favor—has now happened, leaving him bereft and in unrelenting agitation. The final sentiments in 3:26 are like a hammer on an anvil:

> *No peace!*
>
> *No quietness!*
>
> *No rest!*
>
> *But agitation comes!*

What is essential and important in this lament is that Job is now able to voice his deepest questions before God. Suffering must find a voice, and in the presence of his friends, Job is given the opportunity to speak. In speaking, he is finally able to begin to address his experience. To be sure, his opening lament as yet finds no constructive way forward, but still, it is the place to begin, and to begin in transparent honesty. There is such a thing as naive faith—faith that has not yet experienced the test—and equally there is such a thing as considered faith—faith that has passed through the crucible and remains constant. This latter is the faith that Job will ultimately demonstrate, but he must begin at the beginning.

The Problem of Evil

Every Christian must confront the problem of evil, and the Book of Job looms large in this respect, especially for people of faith. The problem of evil can be explained in different ways, of course. The more philosophical person might point to the incompatibility of absolute love and sovereign power in the Christian definition of God. Either his love or his power must apparently be diminished. A more common-sense approach simply asks, "Why does God allow innocent

suffering?" The deaths of children, starvation in third world nations, the proliferation of uncontrolled disease, and the repeated blows that can occur in anyone's life, not to mention natural disasters, all beg an answer. If there is really a God in control of the universe, and if his character is like the Christian Bible declares it to be, how can he not intervene when rampant evil and senseless suffering continue unchecked?

It is only fair to point out, of course, that the problem of evil exists whether or not one believes in God. If one chooses to reject the notion of God altogether (atheism), then logically one is driven to reject the notion of evil itself or simply define it as the things people don't like. Even if one accepts a definition for God other than the one in the Bible, the problem of evil has not vanished. One may say that evil is an illusion (Christian Science) or that it must be part of God's essential nature so that he is both good and bad (eastern mysticism) or that there are multiple deities, some good and some bad (paganism), or that God struggles with forces that are beyond his control (Confucianism, process philosophy). In short, the problem of evil is not a problem unique to Christianity, as though only Christians needed to worry about it.

The Ongoing Questions in the Bible Regarding the Problem of Evil

The questions Job is asking (and we are asking) have all been asked before by biblical characters. The Bible in no way ignores the fact that the problem of evil and suffering is profound. Again and again in the Psalms, one meets these questions. "My soul is in anguish; how long, O Lord, how long?" (Ps. 6:3). "Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" (Ps. 10:1). "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?" (Ps. 13:1-2). "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Ps. 22:1-2). "Why do you sleep? Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression?" (Ps. 44:23-24). In other contexts, these same questions are to be found, such as, the question of Habakkuk to God, "Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?" (Ha. 1:2-3, 13). Jeremiah bluntly prayed to God, "I would speak with you about your justice: Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease? Why is my pain unending and my wound grievous and incurable? Will you be to me like a deceptive brook, like a spring that fails?" (Je. 12:1; 15:18; 21:18). Most famous of all, of course, are the questions of Job. "Why did I not perish at birth and die as I came from the womb? Why is light given to those in misery and life to the bitter of soul, to those who long for death that does not come?" (Jb. 3:11, 16, 20-23; 10:18). Directly to God, Job asked, "Why have you made me your target? Does it please you to oppress me? Why do you hide your face and consider me your enemy?" (7:17-21; 10:3; 13:24). From beneath heaven's altar, the martyrs pose the same question, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" (Rv. 6:9-11).

The upshot of all these questions leads to the conclusion that we have suspected all along, that is, that life on earth is not fair and that God in heaven often seems silent and hidden during periods of human suffering. This is not the answer we want. We want to live in a world full of immediate and clear justice, and we want a God who is immediately accessible to intervene in unmistakable ways. Since God has given us neither, we then ask, "Why?" The Book of Job probes this question, and a full answer will not be given until the incarnation of God's Son.