

THE PURPOSE OF JOB

(Robert L. Alden)

Since, as Paul wrote to Timothy, "all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness," it is incumbent on us to determine the purpose and value of Job. Two purposes overlap each other, one corrective and instructive and the other therapeutic.

Deuteronomy, Proverbs, and isolated passages throughout the Old Testament clearly teach that you get what you deserve, you reap what you sow, and you succeed or fail on the basis of your behavior. Sin will be punished, and trust and obedience will be rewarded. Not only is this simple policy taught, but it is amply illustrated from Genesis (Cain) to Malachi (3:9-12).

The patriarch from Uz, however, did not fit that pattern. He was a righteous man who suffered as if he were guilty of great wickedness. Neither he nor his friends could explain his condition because their watertight systems allowed for no exceptions. In the words of S. Lasine, they had a "worm's-eye view of justice." His friends reasoned that Job must have committed some terrible sin known only to God. Perhaps he had broken some of the laws that God had built into the created order. In the commentary this is called dynamistic retribution. But Job reasoned that God was not paying him any attention, and the system of justice had gone awry as a result of his neglect. One purpose of the book, like the lament psalms and Ecclesiastes, was to address this matter of exceptions to the general principle of just rewards.

Although the Book of Job is not a comprehensive explanation of human suffering, it has always caused its readers to ask why suffering occurs. Scripture gives many reasons, but it is difficult (often impossible) even for us who have the complete biblical revelation to understand specific experiences of sorrow and trouble. When is the suffering of believers God's discipline for misbehavior (Ps 39:11; Jer 30:11; Heb 12:5-11; Rev 3:19), and when is it training for their spiritual maturity (Rom 5:3-5; 2 Cor 1:3-9; 2 Tim 2:3; 4:5-8; Jas 1:2-4) and an opportunity to glorify God by their faith (1 Thess 1:6-10; 2 Thess 1:4-5; Heb 11:37-12:1)? The condition of the man born blind, for example, was not caused by his sin or that of his parents but so that God might be glorified in his healing (John 9:2-3).

What the believer does know, as the Book of Job teaches, is that we serve a personal God who is intimately aware of each person and his or her needs and concerns. Furthermore, the Lord has not only a cosmic plan but an individual purpose he is wisely, justly, and lovingly pursuing in each believer's life. Finally, our God is powerful enough to accomplish his will on earth as well as in heaven. Thus, the other purpose of Job is to give comfort to believers of all ages who find themselves in Job's situation of suffering.

Many Christians would like to blame the devil for all manner of unpleasantness from minor occasions of bad luck to the most severe of human tragedies—loss of wealth, children, health, and honor. But the message of Job is that nothing happens to us that is not ultimately controlled by the knowledge, love, wisdom, and power of our God of all comfort (2 Cor. 1:3).

Like Job, we need to learn that we live and die by grace and that all of life must be lived by faith—faith that God is good and is completely aware of everything that crosses our path. We must believe that he knows all about us and "that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, and who have been called according to his purpose" (Rom 8:28). "What cannot be comprehended through reason must be embraced in love." The Book of Job prods us to ask ourselves: Do I believe in God? Do I reverently and obediently fear him? With all my heart, soul, mind, and strength, do I love God?

