

## **Suffering and Hardship at Work**

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Job

After he loses everything, there is nothing left for Job but to lament. He refuses to incriminate himself falsely, and he refuses to blame or abandon God. But he does not hesitate to express his anguish in the strongest terms. “Why did I not die at birth, come forth from the womb and expire?” (Job 3:11). And “Why is light given to one who cannot see the way, whom God has fenced in?” (Job 3:23). Notice that Job’s lament is almost entirely in the form of questions. The cause of his suffering is a mystery. Indeed, it may be the greatest mystery of faith. Why does God allow people he loves to suffer? Job does not know the answer, so the most honest thing he can do is ask questions.

Regrettably, Job’s friends are not able to endure the mystery of his suffering, so they jump to conclusions about its source. Anyone who has spent time with a suffering friend knows how hard it is to remain present without trying to give answers. It is excruciating to suffer silently with a friend who must rebuild life piece by piece, without any certainty about the outcome. Our instinct is to investigate what went wrong and identify a solution. Then we imagine we can help our friend eliminate the cause and get back to normal as soon as possible. Knowing the cause, we will at least know how to avoid the same fate ourselves. We would rather give a reason

for the suffering — be it right, be it wrong — than to accept the mystery at the heart of suffering.

How much harm have well-intentioned Christians caused by giving pious-sounding answers to suffering, even though we have no idea what we're talking about? "It's all for the best." "It's part of God's plan." "God never sends people more adversity than they can handle." How arrogant to imagine we know God's plan. How foolish to think we know the reason for anyone else's suffering. We don't even know the reason for our own suffering. It would be more truthful — and far more helpful — to admit, "I don't know why this is happening to you. No one should have to go through this." If we can do this, and then remain present, we may become an agent of God's compassion.

Job is not afraid to take his complaints — including work-related complaints — to God. Job knows that all blessing comes from God, and all adversity is allowed — if not caused — by God. Therefore, we can feel a sharp sting in Job's complaint, "From the city the dying groan, and the throat of the wounded cries for help; yet God pays no attention to their prayer" (Job 24:12). Job's friends accuse him of forsaking God, but the evidence is that the righteous are forsaken by God. Meanwhile, the wicked seem to lead a charmed life. "God prolongs the life of the mighty by his power; they rise up when they despair of life. He gives them security, and they are supported; his eyes are upon their ways" (Job 24:22–23). Job believes that the wicked will ultimately be cut down. "They are exalted a

little while, and then are gone; they wither and fade like the mallow; they are cut off like the heads of grain” (Job 24:24). But why does God let the wicked prosper at all?

There is no answer in the book of Job, and there is no answer known to humanity. Economic adversity is an all-too-real pain that many Christians face for years or even a lifetime. We may have to abandon our education when we are young due to financial hardship, and it could prevent us from ever reaching our potential in the workplace. We may be exploited by others or scapegoated to the ruin of our careers. We may be born, struggle to survive, and die under the thumb of a corrupt government that keeps its people in poverty and oppression. These are merely a few work-related examples. In a million other ways, we may suffer serious, grievous, unfair harm that we can never even understand — much less remedy — in this life. By God’s grace, we hope never to become complacent in the face of injustice and suffering. Yet there are times when we cannot make things right, at least not right away. In those situations, we have only three choices: make up a plausible, false explanation about how God allowed it to happen, as Job’s friends do; abandon God; or remain faithful to God without receiving an answer.

We leave the book of Job with observations and questions, rather than neat conclusions. Job proves faithful to God in prosperity and in adversity. This surely is a model for us. But the odious judgments made by his friends

caution us against making too-certain application of any model to our own lives.

God proves faithful to Job. This is our ultimate hope and comfort. But we cannot predict how his faithfulness will be manifest in our lives until his promises are fulfilled in the new heaven and new earth. It would be folly to judge others, or even ourselves, based on the fractional evidence available to us, the paltry wisdom we are able to grasp and the minuscule perspectives we hold. To the hardest questions about the circumstances of our lives, the wisest answer may often be, “I don’t know.”