Toward a Theology of Suffering: Insights from the Book of Job

I suppose everyone has heard the story of Job. In a nutshell, you probably know that he was a wealthy, influential man who lived what we now call “the good life.” He had family, money, power and prestige. The Book of Job describes his situation as being ideal:

He had seven sons and three daughters, and he owned seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred donkeys, and had a large number of servants. He was the greatest man among all the people of the East. (Job 1:2-3 NIV)

That being the case, we might compare him to any of a number of successful people living today, but that is the only thing we learn about Job. Verse one tells us that he was “blameless and upright” and that he “feared God and shunned evil” (Job 1:1 NIV). In verse 8, God himself declares concerning Job: “There is no one on earth like him.”

So then, Job has a good life, and he is also a good person—a very good person. What’s more, good Job may be described as righteousness Job because he is not merely behaving well by social standards. He is conforming his actions and attitudes to the standards of a good God. Now, we might ask, what is the relationship between God’s goodness, Job’s goodness and Job’s good life? Perhaps the answer might be something like this:

God is Good + Job is Good = Life is Good

Turns out, that is a basic theological formula of Job’s day. You will see it expressed over and over again by Job’s friends, and they are as confident about the truth of it as we are that 1+1=2.

If the Book of Job ended after the first few verses, we would simply declare that the righteous are blessed and move on, but that’s not what happens. Job begins as a righteous man with a good life. Very quickly, however, his good life evaporates and formula above no longer seems to work. What happened? What went wrong?

After reading of Job himself, we read about “the adversary”: a message of God that challenges the pop theology of Job’s day. The challenge is framed as a question: “Does Job fear God for nothing?” (Job 1:9 NIV). The challenger is Satan himself. Satan continues by asking God, “Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has?” (Job 1:10 NIV). Then Satan offers this bold assertion: “You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. But now stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face” (Job 1:10-11 NIV). Then, with God’s permission, Job’s sufferings are soon to begin.

Notice what Satan has done regarding our theological formula. He has changed the order. It now reads like this:

God is Good + Life is Good = Job is Good

In other words, Satan says that Job is good only because his life is good. The implied truth is, of course, that Job is only using God for Job’s own benefit and that God has to buy his friends. This raises the fundamental question of the Book of Job. Does anyone serve God solely for the love of God? Does Job? Do you?
This is not a hypothetical question for Job. When his lands are invaded, his property stolen and his children murdered, will he still believe in the goodness of God? When his health is taken, will he still worship God? Job, the prominent, becomes Job, the pathetic. Deprived of all his possessions and children, his life transitions from insult to injury as the text tells us that Job had “painful sores from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head.” His state was so miserable that he “took a piece of broken pottery and scraped himself with it as he sat among the ashes” (Job 2:7-8 NIV).

Interestingly, the only person of his family left to console him, his wife, turns out to be Satan’s little helper. “Curse God and die!” she says. Unwittingly, she tries to advance the adversary’s agenda.

This is where Job becomes our hero and his book takes its place among Hebrew Wisdom Literature. He is going to ask questions of God, for himself and for us. He refuses to be a victim of circumstance and will not take the matter laying down. He declares that he is righteous. He surely does not mean to say that he is perfect. Rather, he has not done anything that should force God to such a heavy-handed treatment of him. Unbeknownst to Job, God agrees, but the torture continues.

Now we meet Job’s friends and they’re thinking is entrenched in the theological formula of the day. So, they simply restate it in a different form. Instead of saying Good God + Good Job = Good Life they say: 

Good God + Bad Job = Bad Life

In one way or another they repeat the words of Job’s friend Eliphaz (in chapter 22):

*Is not your wickedness great? Are not your sins endless? You demanded security from your relatives for no reason; you stripped people of their clothing, leaving them naked. You gave no water to the weary and you withheld food from the hungry, though you were a powerful man, owning land-- an honored man, living on it. And you sent widows away empty-handed and broke the strength of the fatherless. That is why snares are all around you, why sudden peril terrifies you, why it is so dark you cannot see, and why a flood of water covers you.* (Job 22:5-11 NIV)

Since, for him, there can be no other explanation for Job’s experience, Eliphaz guesses at what Job’s sins must have been. He picks the ones typical of a man of power and possessions at the time.

Job’s friends came to comfort him, but reacted when Job cried out in sorrow and confusion: Not Fair! This is not fair! I demand an explanation. I want God to make his case against me. I need him to make sense of this horrid life circumstance.

Job friends felt him pulling them out of their theological comfort zone. They heard Job say:

Good Job + Bad Life = Bad God (unfair, unjust)

But that wasn’t Job’s point. He simply wanted to make sense of it all. He wanted nothing less than a chance to stand before God and plead his case. Job knows he doesn’t deserve the opportunity and even believes he can’t win, but he wants his day in court nonetheless. He says concerning God:

*If only I knew where to find him; if only I could go to his dwelling! I would state my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments. I would find out what he would answer me, and consider what he would say to me.* (Job 23:3-5 NIV)
The book of Job ends dramatically. God shows up. He gives Job the unimaginable gift of his presence and attention. In chapters 38 through 41, God thunders at Job in what will become the ultimate reality check for mankind. And what does God say to Job, his suffering servant? Two things:

1. You’re Not Competent to try this Case against Me
2. You’re Not Capable of Taking My Place

Job had demanded a justice that he could make sense of. He said to God, I don’t understand why I am experiencing what I am experiencing—all this hardship and suffering. God, in essence, responds by reminding Job that the list of things that Job doesn’t understand is quite substantial. God does not then offer Job such understanding; rather, God offers himself. God knows what Job does not. Job thinks he needs answers, but what he really needs is to trust God and let him be God. Listen to Job’s reply (42:2-6):

2 "I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted. 3 You asked, 'Who is this that obscures my plans without knowledge?' Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. 4 "You said, 'Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me.' 5 My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. 6 Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes." (Job 42:2-6 NIV)

And there it is: the lesson of the Book. We find our comfort in suffering not from what God will do for us, but from God himself. Our real need is for him to be near and greater than our affliction. And so it turns out that the more he knows God, the less Job need to know about himself. And for now, for Job, that will have to be enough.

SIDEBAR

My daughter Mandy always loved music. She was one of those kids that could remember all the lyrics of her favorite songs, and she had a nice singing voice. It wasn’t a surprise when she became a stand-out vocal talent in high school. At the graduation ceremony (in 2006) she was recognized as the top female vocalist, and a couple months later she arrived at Colorado State University to study Music Education.

Sometimes life progresses along in just the manner that you would expect. My daughter’s hard work, combined with her giftedness, seemed to flow together toward an opportune moment. She knew what she loved doing, was really good at it, and now had the opportunity to pursue it with her whole heart. No one knew how it all would turn out, but she was on her way. A new phase of her life’s journey had begun, but it didn’t last long.

Before the end of her first semester the change became obvious. By the end of her first year, the journey ended. At first she was having problems hearing the lectures. Before long she could not hear most of the piano notes. Our little girl was going deaf. She lost sixty decibels within the first three months. Within eight months it was closer to one hundred and ten. From September to May the fabric of her dream continued to unravel.

Perhaps the saddest moment came at the end of the second semester. The music students performed their freshman recitals. Mandy stood with her hand on the piano and watched the lips of others to keep
in time. I looked across the room and saw Mandy’s voice teacher, a CSU professor and close friend. We were all holding our sadness in place behind supportive smiles: a tender hypocrisy. When her final song was completed, her fellow students offered a deaf applause (shaking upheld hands) and an embrace. That was that! She left Colorado State in mourning, depressed and believing she would never sing again.

She could have become bitter and she certainly was angry—angry with God. Like Job, she wanted to make sense of the situation. Why did God give her such a wonderful gift if she would never be able to use it? Like Job, she needed to stay on the path (live faithfully), without understanding the plan (how God could use her life, albeit differently than what she imagined).

And that is just what happened. In time, Mandy realized that God’s gift, the music, was inside of her. If you check on Wikipedia you will now find an entry for Mandy Harvey, an American Deaf Jazz Singer. After losing her hearing, she became a professional jazz vocalist. Her website (www.MandyHarveyMusic.com) presents the long list of places where she has performed, including twice at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. and the three albums she has created. Her story is intriguing because it is one of despair, doubt, endurance and eventual joy. And inside the story you will find the challenge of the Book of Job: Will you continue to trust and love God even when there is nothing in it for you?