

The Greatest Struggle

in

T . H . E O . L . D T . E . S . T . A . M . E . N . T

An elderly minister gave this advice to a younger preacher: *“Remember, every time you preach there will be somebody in your congregation who has a broken heart.”* And indeed there is. “Man is born unto trouble,” and never does a day pass but what some heart does break. We live in a fallen, flawed world of sin and suffering. It is a great mystery, but it is also a great certainty that every man, woman, boy, and girl will be asked to walk many a mile with sorrow and pain.

The greatest struggle in the Old Testament, if not of all time, lies in the story of Job. He seems to have lived two thousand years before Christ, during the Patriarchal Age, as he is seen sacrificing in behalf of his children (Job 1:5). There is no reference to Hebrew law or history or institutions. The Book of Job was known in Ezekiel’s day (Ezekiel 14:14-20).

Job lived in “the land of Uz,” perhaps east of Palestine, and was “the greatest of all the men of the east.” His book is thought by many to be the earliest portion of Scripture, although we cannot be certain where, when, or by whom it was penned. Fragments of the book have been found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, and its authenticity is not seriously questioned.

There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job, and that man was blameless, upright, fearing God, and turning away from evil. And seven sons and three daughters were born to him. His possessions also were 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, 500 female donkeys, and very many servants; and that man was the greatest of all the men of the east (Job 1:1-3).

THE ANGELIC GATHERING

In one of the strangest passages in all the Bible, we are told of a gathering of the angelic host. “The sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord.” And in their midst was the fallen adversary of God, Satan.

And the Lord said to Satan, “From where do you come?” Then Satan answered the Lord and said, “From roaming about on the earth and walking around on it.” And the Lord said to Satan, “Have you considered My servant Job? For there is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil.” Then Satan answered the Lord, “Does Job fear God for nothing? Hast Thou not made a hedge about him and his house and all that he has, on every side? Thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But put forth Thy hand now and touch all that he has; he will surely curse Thee to Thy face” (Job 1:7-11).

The righteousness and integrity of Jehovah could not permit Satan’s accusation to go unchallenged. The devil was granted permission to touch the life of Job, with but one exception—he could not slay him. Immediately, Job was stripped of his ten sons and daughters, who were killed by “a great wind from the wilderness.” And his oxen and camels and servants were destroyed by fire and marauding bands of thieves. His entire herd of ten thousand animals was apparently swept away. Adding insult to injury, Satan destroyed Job’s health. He “smote Job with sore boils from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head.” His health and wealth gone, his children dead, Job took “a potsherd to scrape himself while he was sitting among the ashes.”

JOB'S FRIENDS

In the midst of his misery, there appeared the friends of Job to both console and condemn. For seven long days they sat in stony silence. His condition was so pitiful that "they raised their voices and wept." But no one spoke a word to him, "for they saw that his pain was very great." A week later, the friends began their speeches, which in some ways were worse than their silence.

The friends of Job proposed a shallow, superficial view of suffering, that it is proportionate to a man's sin. Since the righteous prosper and the wicked suffer, Job's great sorrow was the result of his great sin. They insisted:

The wicked man writhes in pain all his days (Job 15:20).

Who ever perished being innocent? (Job 4:7).

Those who plow iniquity and those who sow trouble harvest it (Job 4:8).

Indeed, the light of the wicked goes out (Job 18:5).

How long will you say these things, and the words of your mouth be a mighty wind? Does God pervert justice or does the Almighty pervert what is right? If your sons sinned against Him, then He delivered them into the power of their transgression. If you would seek God and implore the compassion of the Almighty, if you are pure and upright, surely now He would rouse Himself for you and restore your righteous estate (Job 8:2-6).

JOB'S REPLY

As the hours stretched into what seemed eternal days and the days into interminable weeks, with no relief or respite forthcoming, Job began to wrestle with himself and with God. He blew hot and cold, constantly fighting depression, despair, and self-pity. Job cried out:

Let the day perish on which I was to be born and the night which said, "A boy is conceived" (Job 3:3).

So that my soul would choose suffocation, death rather than my pains (Job 7:15).

My face is flushed from weeping, and deep darkness is on my eyelids (Job 16:16).

Remember that my life is but breath, my eye will not again see good (Job 7:7).

For He bruises me with a tempest, and multiplies my wounds without cause (Job 9:17).

Now my days are swifter than a runner: they flee away, they see no good (Job 9:25).

Why then hast Thou brought me forth out of the womb? Would that I had died and no eye had seen me! (Job 10:18).

I should have been as though I had not been, carried from womb to tomb (Job 10:19).

GOD'S COUNSEL

After a long series of charges and complaints from Job, Jehovah confronted Job, and all of us, with the profound idea that no one, good or evil, has any right or reason to question the judgment of Almighty God. No amount of suffering, discomfort, or disappointment is sufficient to doubt or deny the wisdom and justice of God.

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind and said, "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Now gird up your loins like a man, and I will ask you, and you instruct Me! Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth! Tell Me, if you have understanding, who set its measurements, since you know? Or who stretched the line on it?" (Job 38:1-5).

There follows a lengthy series of questions designed to convey the absolute sovereignty of the Creator, concluding with, "Will the fault-finder contend with the Almighty?" (Job 40:2). Job could *only* respond, "Behold, I am insignificant; what can I reply to Thee? I lay my hand on my mouth. Once I have spoken, and I will answer; even twice, and I will add no more" (Job 40:4, 5).

JOB'S INTEGRITY

Through the entire ordeal, one thing must be stressed, that Job did not do what Satan insisted he would do—curse God. Nowhere did the Lord impugn the basic integrity of Job, but rather referred to him twice as "my servant Job" (Job 42:7, 8). The Lord "accepted Job" (Job 42:9).

Job did not seek to drown his difficulties in alcohol or to blow his mind with an exotic drug. He did not turn against his friends, but instead prayed for them (Job 42:10).

To our knowledge, Job never understood entirely why he was permitted to suffer so long and so intensely. But he did understand this, that God rules over all and is to be served.

Through all this Job did not sin, nor did he blame God (Job 1:22).

Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity? (Job 2:10).

And as for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last He will take His stand on the earth. Even after my skin is destroyed, yet from my flesh I shall see God; whom I myself shall behold, and whom my eyes shall see and not another. My heart faints within me (Job 19:25-27).

As God lives, who has taken away my right, and the Almighty, who has embittered my soul, for as long as life is in me, and the breath of God is in my nostrils, my lips certainly will not speak unjustly, nor will my tongue mutter deceit. Far be it from me that I should declare you right; till I die I will not put away my integrity from me. I hold fast my righteousness and will not let it go. My heart does not reproach any of my days (Job 27:2-6).

Through turmoil and testing unprecedented in any age, Job remained true to God. At the end, he was blessed greatly, for the Lord "increased all that Job had twofold" (Job 42:10).

And the Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning, and he had 14,000 sheep, and 6,000 camels, and 1,000 yoke of oxen, and 1,000 female donkeys. And he had seven sons and three daughters. And he named the first Jemimah, and the second Keziah, and the third Keren-happuch. And in all the land no women were found so fair as Job's daughters; and their father gave them inheritance among their brothers. And after this Job lived 140 years, and saw his sons, and his grandsons, four generations. And Job died, an old man and full of days (Job 42:12-17).

JOB'S MESSAGE TO MODERN MAN

We ought not insist upon a full explanation of human misfortune. Trouble may be the result directly of wrongdoing, as in some cases of AIDS, venereal disease, and cirrhosis of the liver. Or it may be the result of another's wrongdoing, as in the case of an accident caused by a drunken driver. Both Abel and Uriah died as a consequence of another's sin. John the Baptist was beheaded by a lustful monarch whose sense was dulled by a silly dancing girl.

We live in a fallen world and are free to choose, then to bear the results of our choices. Our bones break when we violate the law of gravity. Our lungs fail when filled with water. And we share fully in the pain which wrecks, wracks, and wrenches our planet.

The man who is bound and determined to have a reason for any and every tragedy will only

be confused and distraught. One man walks away from a grinding crash saying, "The Lord was with me," while the bereaved family whose father died in the other automobile asks, "But why was He not with us?" Mortal life is far too complicated for simple, casual explanations. There are moments when, at best, we can only say with Job, "For He is not a man as I am that I may answer Him, that we may go to court together" (Job 9:32).

It is possible to be good, godly, right, and righteous even when discouraged. Job was totally tormented, broken in body, and bereaved in spirit. Having lost his wealth, his family, and his health, he wished only to die and escape. Yet he did not feel compelled to deny his faith.

There are those who insist that Christians live always on the mountaintops, with shining faces, glowing eyes, and lilting voices, praising God for the latest round of tragedies! However, at the death of Lazarus, "Jesus wept." He was saddened by the death of John the Baptist and even withdrew for a time into the desert. When the health of Paul failed, Paul three times banged at heaven's doors begging for release. His faith remained firm, but his body and mind struggled with pain.

It is surely not sinful to be sad when sadness is called for. We ought not feel guilty when, in moments of great loss, sorrow and discouragement are our lot.

Trouble and tragedy are often blessings in disguise. Paul wrote out of his own experience, "He has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.' Most gladly, therefore" I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me" (2 Corinthians 12:9). David confessed, "It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I may learn Thy statutes" (Psalms 119:71).

John Milton, while blind, dictated to his daughter the finest poems of his career. Beethoven, deaf the last seventeen years of his life, composed the most beautiful of melodies. Robert Louis Stevenson languished most of his brief life in bed, wracked with coughing spells and tuberculosis, yet wrote one exciting story after another. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, suffering from insomnia for long years, turned his sleepless nights into beautiful verses repeated by millions.

In the blackest midnight of life that one can endure, Job declared, "But He knows the way I

take; when He has tried me, I shall come forth as gold" (Job 23:10). And so can you. Beyond pain there is gain for those who trust God.

A rainbow is universally acclaimed and appreciated, yet it is formed by a combination of sunshine and rain. A world without clouds and storms would be a world without vegetation or food. Only sunshine always makes a desert, and life that has no struggle has no meaning.

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials; knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. . . . Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who love Him (James 1:2-4, 12).

When we arrive in the land that is fairer than day, the things which drew us closer to God will alone be regarded as the chiefest blessings of mortal life. The shadows through which we passed will be eternal blessings if they caused us to seek the Lord.

Behind all that is seen is an unseen hand and an everlasting arm. David writes, "I will lift up my eyes to the mountains; from whence shall my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth" (Psalms 121:1, 2). Peter adds, "Casting all your anxiety upon Him, because He cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7).

Trouble came to Job, and it will come someday to you. Will you curse the darkness, hurl

your soul into a pit of self-pity, thereby making yourself and others miserable, or will you whisper with Job, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21)?

CONCLUSION

The book *Light From Many Lamps* contains a paragraph regarding the beautiful hymn "Abide With Me":

Henry Francis Lyte walked into his study . . . an old man . . . near the end of the journey. He was tired and ill. The doctor told him that he had only a few months to live. He thumbed the well-worn Bible on his desk and it fell open at one of his favorite passages: "Abide with us; for it is towards evening and the day is now far spent." In the quiet of his curtained study, he read and reread those familiar comforting words.

And all at once he was no longer old and tired! All at once he was no longer sad and burdened, no longer discouraged! Words sang through his mind; and he put them down on paper; and in less than an hour he had written one of the most beautiful and inspiring hymns of all time: "Abide With Me."

When the famous nurse, Edith Cavell, went before a German firing squad, she whispered the words of "Abide With Me." When the *HMS Stella* was sinking with 105 victims during the Second World War, a woman—one of the noble unidentified of the world—stood on the bridge and sang "Abide With Me" until the others were singing with her, and they went down bravely.

Let us be sure that God does abide with us when the worst happens.

—Paul Rogers

Applying Scripture to Life

Follow the Leader

A war photograph shows a squad of men crossing a heavily mined field. At the point is a specialist carrying a mine detector. Some of the land is apparently safe, but other parts are salted with a lethal punch. Follow the leader, the photo says, and you will stay alive.

Gordon MacDonald,
Action Plan for Great Dads

Just Existing

When nature plants an oak in the forest, she does not say, "Be a lichen, a small ground-creeping thing!" She says, "Grow! Become a tall, strong, mountain tree!" When we hold our baby in our arms we do not say, "My child, be good for nothing." Neither does God say, "Be nothing; do nothing! Just exist as humbly and meekly as you

can!" He says, "Quit you like men!"

Keep on Climbing

A little boy was leading his sister up a mountain path, and the trail was rather difficult. The little girl complained, "Why, this isn't a path at all! It's rocky and bumpy!" Her brother replied, "Sure, the bumps are what you climb on."