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Chapter IX

Job and Me

Many times throughout Debbie's sickness, while she was lying upstairs on our bed, I thought about the case of Job, the Old Testament believer who wrestled with such a severe dose of suffering. This was a recurring meditation in my life. It was definitely not that I thought I had suffered as much as he did. It was just that I had often written and lectured on this famous man whose name is almost synonymous with pain, and, frankly, I wanted to know if the lessons he learned could in any way be applied to my situation.

In other words, even though I hadn't suffered as much as had Job, was what he learned practical enough to help me, thousands of years later? Or to say it still another way, I had said many times that Job's lessons really worked in real life predicaments. Now I had a chance to actually prove it! Could I "put my money where my mouth was" during what was easily the toughest time in my entire life?

I started by remembering a few of Job's problems. Maybe this would make me more appreciative of the remedy that he discovered. There was no question that Job suffered greatly, both physically and emotionally. On top of all this, he couldn't understand why God did nothing to help him. Why was God so silent? Couldn't God just reach down and heal him any time He wanted to? He was the God and Creator of the universe, wasn't He? But now the situation had lasted far too long. It didn't seem like the suffering would ever end. Yet, we are also told that Job's trials taught him fantastic truths that completely transformed his life.

Checking the Book of Job once again, I reviewed his situation. Although he was a righteous man, Job was tested by Satan with numerous calamities. One major problem was not enough! His domestic animals were either killed or stolen by outlaws. There goes the family livelihood! Then his servants were murdered, too. Then the evil touched his own family. All of his children were killed in a desert storm (Job 1:13-19).

Then phase two of the suffering kicked in, and the pain moved closer to home. Satan tormented Job with personal sickness in the form of painful sores from his head to his feet. Either from the itching or from the oozing of the sores, he had to scrape himself with a piece of broken pottery. "Curse God and die," his own wife counseled him (2:7-9). In spite of all of this, Job refused to sin by charging God with the fault of these multiple tragedies (1:20-22; 2:10).

Job didn't have the luxury of sitting in a classroom and philosophizing about his dilemma in some theoretical, detached manner. Neither did I. He was forced to live through his struggles and pain. So was I. But I didn't suffer as much as he did. Since he personally "paid the price" that he did, his experience should be quite instructive for me. As I said, I gravitated towards the advice and comradery of others who had lost either spouse or children. So, could Job's conclusion be applied to my own situation with Debbie? I wanted to know how well it would actually work.

After awhile, Job began to challenge God. Several times he demanded his right to have a hearing before the God of the universe. He even requested a debate on the subject (Job 13:3; 13:21-22; 27:2). Job's major question was quite a normal one: "Why am I suffering the way I am? What could possibly justify this horror?"

God responded in chapters 38-41. He spoke to Job and challenged him to answer an entire host of questions--sort of like a final exam. More than once, God asked Job if he could solve the problem of pain and suffering. Understandably, Job didn't have an answer.

It is instructive that God never answers Job's main question, a typical one that we all ask from time to time. He doesn't tell Job why everything has happened to him. I think this tells us something very crucial and that it is even one of the keys to the entire issue. If God had provided a philosophical justification of suffering, could Job even have understood it? We're not talking about graduate school here, but an audience with Almighty God! But perhaps a layman's answer would still not have been understood by Job, or perhaps worse, wouldn't have done what Job most wanted or needed.

After all, don't the textbooks say that we shouldn't rationalize with those who have just lost a loved one? Although I sometimes enjoyed philosophical discussions with my friends during Deb's sickness, usually I wanted no part of this sort of banter. I had no time or patience for it. After all, this was not just a theoretical situation! I wasn't interested in the three leading theories on the subject. I was hurting! If I knew this, wouldn't God? Maybe God knew that such an answer, on whatever level, was exactly what Job didn't need!

Whatever the reason why God never gave Job an answer to his main question, one thing is crystal clear. In the end, Job was entirely satisfied. But why did he abandon his protest against God? What had he learned?

Job came to understand that God could do anything, including giving an explanation for the suffering in the world. First, Job realized that God was omnipotent--he confessed that God was all-powerful (Job 42: 1-2). Indeed, only God could perform all the things that He had just asked Job to do, including solving the puzzle of pain. Next, Job realized that the problem was actually with him--he simply did not understand the areas he was questioning (42:3). This realization must have hurt his pride! But he was honest enough to admit that he had lost the debate. After his "showdown" with the Lord, Job declared that all he could do was repent. He now despised the position that he had previously taken (42:6).

This wasn't just some mental conclusion on Job's part, either. It cost him something. He had been humbled. He had to relinquish his previous objection. Even more, he needed to act further on his decision and repent. All of this, he did willingly. What in the world could he have learned to make him do these things? What changed his mind so drastically?

We can now summarize what Job learned in his encounter with the Lord--that which became the foundation for his liberation and peace. Based on what he knew about God, Job now realized that he could trust God even in those things that he still did not know. In other words, Job concluded that he already knew enough about God to realize that there was a good reason(s) for his suffering, even if he did not understand what it was. He could trust the One who did know why it all had happened.

Therefore, Job was satisfied without ever knowing why God hadn't answered the question about his suffering. And we must remember that he made his decision even while he was still afflicted, before God blessed him (42:10-17). So it wasn't all the forthcoming blessings that made Job repent; his change occurred first.

I had realized long before Debbie got sick that there was a tremendous principle here for me to learn, as well. The times when I knew the reason why pain and evil occurred, it was so much the better. I realized that Scripture provided many of these reasons, for which I was thankful.

But even when I could not figure it all out, or when God seemed to me to be so silent, I also knew that I still had to trust Him. Why? Because I knew more about God than Job did. He didn't even have the Scripture, for one thing. So I had even more grounds than he did for concluding that God knew everything and could do anything in accord with His nature. I certainly knew enough about Him to trust Him in the things that I didn't understand, such as Deb's illness.

I also realized that there were plenty of other things in the last category, too--things that I didn't know! They say that this is an inevitable result of earning a Ph.D.--you're exposed to so many items for study that you are never able to master them all. So I had no problem believing that I was finite. In fact, I never quite understood why human beings who knew better, frequently acted as if they had unlimited knowledge. But surely there is much in the universe that we do not know.

So could I really learn from Job's experiences and apply it to our situation? That's what I wanted to know. I realized that his account was included in Scripture so I could read, learn, and implement these truths. And I knew that it all made good sense, too. But what could it do for my pain?

I was also suffering, although, granted, not on the scale that Job did. Still, I wrestled with some of the same quandaries: Would Debbie be taken from us? Why did she have to suffer like this? Why was pain my constant companion during her sickness? How was I to handle what seemed to be God's silence? Why didn't God do something about the situation? Weren't we His children? Hadn't we been trying to live for Him?

I think that we probably know more often than Job did why we suffer. Scripture helps us in this regard. We have more revelation than he did, which includes the experiences of others, like Joseph's rejection by his own family, David's persecution by his family and friends alike, and the prejudice against Daniel. We also knew about the very Son of God in the Garden of Gethsemane, Paul's physical suffering and unanswered prayer, and the persecution (and even the death) of early believers. It was comforting to see that we were not alone in our struggles.

What about our particular case? What did we know? We knew that sin affected the world and pain and suffering often resulted. We knew that God had not been silent toward us. He had clearly spoken to Debbie during her worst moment in the CAT scan, forever changing her life. I knew that I couldn't charge God with not answering our prayers, and couldn't have asked for a more clear answer. Further, He revealed to me about her cancer count going down so that we could have a week of vacation. No, I reminded myself, I couldn't say that He had been silent.

But then again, in many other things we didn't know why we were suffering. It was in these items that Job's advice was best applied. I knew that the basis for Christianity was firm. I couldn't deny this, and even in these troubled times, this gave me great comfort. Therefore, what I knew about God was sufficient to trust Him with those questions where I didn't know the answers. I could trust Him whether or not I had an explanation for a particular situation.

So how would I actually apply this knowledge to the numerous circumstances when I didn't know why things happened the way they did? On these occasions, I resolved to remind myself what I did know about God. This approach could take many forms. Subjects for meditation could include the attributes of God, the truth about heaven, numerous other promises of God, or other aspects of His Word.

But given the more than half dozen books that I had written on the subject of Jesus' resurrection, my thoughts almost always followed a very specific trail. It had always given me instant relief during troubled times in my past. But could it have the same results in the situation with Debbie? Or would it fail to produce the desired benefits this time?

So here's what I said many times to myself during Deb's sickness: "I'm not always sure why things are happening the way they are, but this is still the same world in which God raised His Son from the dead. Eternal life for believers is the result. Therefore, I can trust God that there is a good answer to this situation even if I don't know what it is. At worst, I'll see Debbie again in heaven."

So how was Job's lesson applied during Debbie's struggles? How could I build a bridge between theory and practice? Even more down to earth, what would make me relax and feel better, even when I didn't know all the answers?

I pictured a situation similar to that of Job--with me asking the "Why?" questions. What would God say to me if He came and spoke to me as He did to Job in 38:3:

Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. (NIV)

What would God ask me in a situation like this one? I knew in an instant: He would undoubtedly ask me about the resurrection, about which I had done so much research. Here's a sample of how I pictured the conversation going:

"Lord, I just can't understand why You are allowing these things to happen to my family and me. Why us, especially when Debbie is so young and all four kids are still at home?"

"I just want to ask you one thing. Did I raise my Son Jesus from the dead?"

"Well yes, certainly, Lord. But how does that help me in my current sorrow?"

"Answer me once again--you do not seem to be understanding my point. Do you really believe that I raised Jesus from the dead?"

"Sure I do, but"

"Since you know that this is a world where I raised Jesus, don't you also know that His teachings are true?"

"Yes, I've always said that would follow."

"And do you have reason to think that I am still in control of the universe?"

"Yes I think you are, Sir. I have no reason to question it."

"Then isn't it also the case that, while you don't know why you are suffering, I do?"

"Well, certainly that's true."

"And whether or not you know why Debbie is suffering, have I not chosen you two in my Son, to be with me in heaven, where you'll see her again?"

"Yes, Lord. I couldn't even imagine a more glorious truth."

"Then what remains to be asked? Since you know these truths, including the resurrection, shouldn't you trust me in those areas where you don't know all of the answers?"

(Gulp)

"Do you, then, have enough knowledge to trust me through circumstances that you do not, as yet, understand?"

"I think you've got me, Lord. Yes, I should trust you with all of my heart."

"Then review and practice these truths. Don't get sidetracked by other issues, no matter how painful. You do not have to carry the heavy burden of trying to figure everything out. I want you to trust me with all of your heart."

Granted, sometimes my questions and worries were more stubborn than this. But I learned that, in these cases, I just needed to be more forceful with myself. No matter how much I hurt or how much I might have wanted to cry out in anguish, I had to make myself focus on the factual issues alone.

I can't emphasize too much the directness of the approach: I could not allow myself to get sidetracked here. There were very few issues that needed to be addressed at this particular point. When I wanted to shift the discussion back to the disease or to the pain, I sometimes had to forcefully say, "Not now. This is not the time for this."

Whenever the pain felt unbearable, I would sit down, usually outside on my porch. Then I forced myself to address the questions that I thought God would ask if He were challenging me, as He did Job. I quickly discovered that I could not answer this line of reasoning. Since the facts were true, the conclusion followed.

I made myself answer each of the questions as if I were hearing them for the first time. Once again, I had to decide. Do the facts say that God raised His Son from the dead? (Yes or No?) Then, is eternal life a reality? (Yes or No?) Then, are Jesus' other teachings also true? (Yes or No?) While other issues may be important, these were sufficient for me to know that everything would work out in the end, even eternally so. I would know the answers to my questions one day. I could wait, assured that there were, indeed, answers. And best of all, Debbie would be waiting for me in heaven, all smiles, for she already knew!

Of course, this might not be the exact line of questioning that God would use with everyone. I think the examination would be tailored differently, according to our own situations. For some, the issue might be, "And didn't I already answer a major prayer request (perhaps even healing) for you last year?" (Yes or No?) Or: "Didn't I save you out of some pretty bad circumstances? (Yes or No?) Or, more like Job: "You've studied (or always appreciated) my creation. Can you explain the intricacies of my design--say, the secrets of DNA or enzyme development? (Yes or No?) Or even tougher and also like Job: "Can you explain to me why there is pain and suffering in the world that I created?" (Yes or No?) "Why is free will necessary?"

Even though the challenge could be different, the conclusion would be the same. If we cannot explain or even understand God's ways, on what grounds can we "second guess" Him? He created the world, raised His Son from the dead, saved us, answered our prayer(s), and prepared heaven for us. Then why can't we trust Him in our present circumstances? Why can't we at least realize that He knows more than we ever could, and that includes what has happened to us?

For me, an incredible aspect of this approach is that it is definitely not based on some blind leap of faith. At no point was Job told to believe something without a basis. God pointed him to facts in the real world, usually from the areas of biology and physics. That's pretty noteworthy in an age where science is frequently thought to oppose religious belief. And the resurrection of Jesus Christ was an historical fact. No, there was no way I could say that God had asked either Job or me to believe in a vacuum.

Once again, Job's realization is the key: what we already know about God is enough for us to trust Him in those things that we don't know. Such a truth should keep us focused on the most important matters in the Christian faith. Even more so, it can free us from the burden of always having to figure out exactly what God is trying to accomplish when believers hurt.

Incidentally, even the insinuation that we have a right to know God's thoughts is ridiculous, besides violating clear biblical teachings. The facts are quite simple here: I am certainly not God. Christians would readily admit this. Then why do I insist on acting like I have a right to know all of these things?

True, it could be the almost unbearable pain we're undergoing at the time that influences us to do what we probably would not do otherwise. But this is all the more reason to make sure that our suffering falls into line. In short, it's precisely because of the pain that we need to apply these truths, and do so forcefully! Just like suffering often leads us to think things that we would prefer not to, so it now can help us to learn and accomplish what we need to. Do we want to gain peace, or not?

This is what Job learned. He unquestionably went through some deep waters and suffered what few others have, either before or since. He responded by charging God with treating him unjustly. But God's personal challenge brought him back forcefully to his senses. In the end, Job confessed his rebellion and acknowledged that he had charged headlong into matters that he did not understand. He also recognized that God could do all things. As a result, he knew that he could trust God to take care of the deep things of the universe, including the problem of suffering and pain.

Although I didn't suffer like Job did, I still found that his remedy would work for me, precisely in the middle of my pain. I applied his lesson very often during the four months of Debbie's sickness, and it never once failed to provide relief. Every single time I thought through what would be God's challenge to me concerning the resurrection of Jesus, I realized again that the theme of Job could answer my deepest questions about our suffering. In fact, the application even became rather easy; I didn't reach it through gritted teeth.

What, precisely, did God do for me through this practice? While I still didn't know exactly why Debbie was dying, it quickly became a moot point. Anyone who knows me and my questioning mind set would realize how revolutionary this was. But the reason for the suffering was inconsequential. I knew that the One who had raised His Son Jesus from the dead knew the reason why. Since I couldn't deny this, I could wait for the final answer.

Along the way, I gained something else, too. Since I was no longer tempted to even ask the "Why?" question, neither did I suffer the additional emotional pain associated with not knowing the answer, or thinking that God should have done otherwise. It is well-known that emotional suffering is worse than physical pain. I could now deal with the daily issues directly in front of me, without adding the anxiety-causing distress that comes from worrying about the extra "what-ifs" of the situation. This allowed me the tremendous blessing that, whatever else happened, I knew that God was indeed in control. And I also knew that I would again be with Debbie in heaven, and for all eternity. I could rest in this, even in the middle of the suffering. It really worked, too! The relief it provided was immeasurable. God had answered my prayers.