

HOW CAN A MAN BE RIGHTEOUS BEFORE GOD?

Job 9:2

At first glance this question posed by Job is ironic, in that the person asking it is one who was described by God Himself at the opening of the book as “a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil” (1:8). We are forced to wonder why a man so highly regarded by God should wonder how it is possible to be righteous before Him.

Of course, Job is not the only one to ask this question in this book. In fact, he most likely is responding to the query of Eliphaz in 4:17, “Can a mortal be more righteous than God?” Furthermore, Bildad repeats Job's question in identical terms later in the discussion (25:4).

Such questions reflect a keen interest in the subjects of *righteousness*, *uprightness* and *blamelessness* throughout the book. The various forms of these three words are found 58 times in Job (righteous - 33, upright - 10, complete [blameless] - 15). Of note is the breakdown of who uses these terms. Job is most prolific, including these terms a total of 22 times (righteous - 13, upright - 3, complete - 6). Elihu is the other one to employ these words heavily (righteous - 11, upright - 4, complete - 2). The remaining occurrences are divided between Eliphaz (7 - 4, 1, 2), Bildad (5 - 3, 1, 1), God (6 - 1, 2, 3), Zophar (1 - 1, 0, 0) and Job's wife (1 - 0, 0, 1).

The statistics just presented are partly misleading, unless I hasten to point out that five of the six times God uses these words He is describing Job! Furthermore, the only time the Lord uses the term for righteousness is when He challenges Job by asking, “Will you really annul My judgment? Will you condemn Me that you may be justified?” (40:8).

What these facts tell us is that Job and his friends are thoroughly perplexed about what they consider to be a major issue, the question at hand. However, God does not even speak directly to the matter that is of such concern to them. The obvious question is: Why not? Why does the Lord who thinks so highly of Job (1:8) seem to completely ignore his searching question asked in the agony of his body and spirit?

The explanation for the previously mentioned facts and the answer to the question I have just posed necessitates an understanding of the purpose and flow of the book of Job. Therefore, we will devote ourselves now to that end.

The first two chapters accomplish far more than merely introducing the discussions that comprise the greater portion of the book. Rather, these two chapters serve to set forth the primary issue of the book. That issue is stated by none other than the accuser, the devil, who inquires of God, “Does Job fear God for nothing?” Responding to God's high praise of Job as “a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil,” the satan suggests that such piety is not genuine for Job or for any mortal. He proposes that Job, rather than being the best example of genuine piety, is conclusive proof that man worships God for what man can get out of God. After all, is not Job the singular example of a man devoted to God—and at the same time an extremely wealthy man with a happy family, much livestock, many servants and widespread fame?

We must realize that the satan is not attacking the man Job nearly so much as he is attacking Job's God with his question. If the satan is correct about the motivation for Job's piety (and that of all devout humans), there are serious implications about how God is operating in His relation with man. At the same time the satan is questioning whether genuine piety is a true possibility for man, he is also questioning whether genuine grace is a reality with God! He is suggesting, "*Must* not God give His blessings to man in order to get any devotion from man? Is it not true that God's blessings, rather than His person, are ultimately worshiped and desired by even the most pious of men?"

The basis for the relationship between God and those who worship Him is thus the primary, vital issue in the book of Job. The satan submits that this relationship is a mutual, almost contractual give and take. Man gives God his worship and in turn receives His blessings. God gives man His blessings and in turn receives his worship.

If the satan is correct, God and man are on the same moral level. God needs man to feed His ego as much as man needs God to make life enjoyable. If the satan is correct, there is no such thing as *grace*, only *business*. If the satan is correct, the ultimate object of the godly man's worship is himself and his comfort rather than God.

To prove his thesis the satan proposes that Job be forced to lose all his possessions. The accuser believes that Job will certainly curse God for not keeping His part of the agreement and thus prove the satan correct. God agrees to the test, Job loses all he owns, and the satan loses his bet.

Not one to quit, the satan declares that Job is merely a hard case. However, force him to suffer excruciating physical discomfort and Job surely will curse God and win the day for the accuser. God agrees to the test, Job loses his health and comfort, and the satan loses his bet.

So the satan is proven wrong on all counts. In spite of the loss of everything except life itself, Job refuses to curse God and die even when encouraged to do so by his wife! Instead he defends God (2:10). Genuine piety on the part of man is a demonstrated reality.

God's character and motives have also been evidenced clearly. He has willingly allowed the removal of all His blessings from His most devout worshiper, confirming that He owes no man anything and that no man has any claims on Him. There is no *business* relationship between God and His worshipers.

Some readers of the book of Job might wonder at this point why the book does not close after the second chapter, when the satan has been proven wrong and God has been justified. I offer two key suggestions for the necessity of chapters three and following. First, while we have seen that the relationship between God and man is not based upon mutual "give and take," the true basis for that relationship has not yet been set forth explicitly. Secondly, while we readers of the book can understand what has happened and why it has happened, Job has been allowed no such privilege.

This second point is of no small importance. While we recognize the intense conflict between God and the Satan that lies behind Job's suffering, the sufferer himself is not aware that this conflict is the reason for his suffering. Job's friends assume he is suffering because of sin, because everyone knows that God blesses the godly and judges the ungodly. Job, on the other hand, knows his own godliness and refuses to deny that fact no matter how much pressure his friends or even God puts upon him. Yet, at the same time, Job cannot understand why God has so forcefully "punished" an innocent man. "What have I done to deserve this?" is his question of God.

We know the answer to that question is: Nothing! Job believes the answer to that question is: Nothing. From his perspective, however, the only explanation for his suffering as a godly person is that God flaunts His omnipotence in a capricious, malicious manner without regard to His subjects. What else can Job conclude in light of his circumstances?

The ninth chapter of Job is his expression of hopelessness in his situation. How can he defend his righteousness before such a capricious God as He seems to be (9:2)? If someone took Him on in court, he would be unable to answer any of His questions (9:3). God is too smart and too powerful (9:4-10), and He does not answer to man nor withdraw His anger from man (9:11-13). After all, look how mercilessly He is treating me (9:11-13)! Even though I am righteous, I would be condemned before Him who is hostile toward all His creation (9:19-24). My life is fleeting (9:25-26). If I drop my charge of injustice against Him, He will still treat me as a guilty person (9:27-29). If I repent of my charge, it will not save me from destruction (9:30-31). I can't drag God to court, nor do I have a mediator to force Him to answer for His actions against me (9:32-33). If He would just let up on me, I would have a little bit of hope (9:34-35).

Later on Job does attempt to call God to court (13:13-28). Job hopes to force God to explain His actions and at the same time vindicate his own righteousness. After all, he has nothing to lose other than life itself, and life is not worth keeping in such conditions.

Job's effort is in vain. God does not appear in court, nor does He defend or explain His actions in allowing Job's suffering. What He does do, however, is speak to Job out of the whirlwind and reveal to Job His absolute wisdom and marvelous grace revealed in His management of creation (38-41). He forcefully reproves Job for his wrong attitude (40:8), giving him the opportunity to repent and cease from his error (42:1-6).

Job never does learn the background to his suffering! He never is told the real reason for his pain and sorrow. However, he no longer feels any need to know, for he has now "seen" God. The suffering saint recognizes that God can be fully trusted to run the universe as He knows best in His wisdom and strength. All is well.

One question remains for us to consider. If the relationship between God and man is not based on a contractual "give and take" business relationship, on what is it grounded?

That question was also answered in chapters 38-42, where we see God mercifully revealing Himself to Job in spite of his brash, senseless challenge to Him. The Lord's mercy is further evidenced in His willingness to forgive the friends of Job for their false doctrine (42:7-9).

Beyond His mercy is God's grace showered on Job. This mortal deserved no response from God at all, yet He revealed Himself to Job in such a fashion that Job could say that all his former knowledge of God was mere hearsay compared to what he now knew (42:5). Finally, when all His purposes had been accomplished, God in grace multiplied all Job's former blessings on him (42:10-17).

The relationship between God and His worshipers is thus shown to be based solely and completely on His mercy and grace accepted in faith by man. Nothing else plays a part. Man's righteousness, whether it exists or not, does not enter into this equation, which is why God's only use of that term in the entire book occurs when He rebukes Job (40:8).

How can a man be in the right before God? In the context of Job, God tells us this is not the primary issue. The ultimate issue is that we recognize the greatness of our all-sovereign, all-wise, merciful, gracious God and trust Him no matter what His will allows—and whether or not we know what He is doing. Then, strangely enough, that question is answered (Genesis 15:6)!