
Job: God's Sovereignty in Suffering, Ronald Hanko. Jenison: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2021. Pp. 160. \$19.50 (hardcover). ISBN-13: 978-1944555825. [Reviewed by Martyn McGeown]

If you are like this reviewer, your approach to Job is to read chapter 1-2, wade through chapters 3-37 trying to comprehend the speeches of Job and his friends, and then with a sense of relief to read the concluding chapters of the book when the Lord appears.

Or perhaps you have read a thick verse-by-verse commentary on the whole book, which would be no mean feat. (Two standard works—by Matthew Henry and Keil and Delitzsch—are 236 pages and 390 pages respectively; I remember that there was in the

seminary library a multivolume series of sermons on Job by a Puritan preacher: his congregation must have had “the patience of Job”!).

Ron Hanko has rendered the believer a great service. Without giving a verse-by-verse commentary on the book, he has supplied a section-by-section explanation of Job. He also includes study questions so that this book can be used as an aid to group Bible studies. The whole book comprises fewer than 150 pages, which is very manageable. The book also divides very simply: “The History of Job” (1:1-3:26), “Three Rounds of Speeches” (4:1-31:40), “Elihu’s Entry” (32:1-37:24), and “God and Job” (38:1-42:17).

Four themes are developed in the book: God’s sovereignty in the afflictions of His people; Job’s exemplary uprightness; the foolishness (even wickedness) of Job’s friends, a sin that is so serious that God requires Job to make an atonement for it; and Job’s sinful questioning of God’s ways. Yes, Job sinned in the book: he did not sin in the way that Satan wanted (Satan wanted him to curse God), but he did fall into sinful questioning of God, which sin God rebukes.

The book begins with Job’s

integrity. Job was “perfect” (1:1), which does not mean without sin, but has a reference to “conduct that is above reproach” (12). Nevertheless, warns Hanko, “Job’s uprightness did not shelter him from God’s chastening hand or mean that he was above chastening” (13). That is important to note because God did not chasten Job for one particular sin, but to display His own glory in Job, to purify Job, and to teach Job.

Suffering, of course, is the experience of everyone, including believers. Hanko applies the word to the suffering believer, emphasizing God’s sovereignty:

The sins to which we are tempted in suffering are many. We sin by questioning God’s justice and goodness, by complaining and being discontented, by thinking we deserve better than God sends us, by taking out our frustrations and discontent on others, by attempting to find a reason for our trials beyond what God reveals in His word (as Job did), by using our trials as an excuse to commit deliberate sins, by cutting ourselves off from God and from others in suffering. Satan is there to tempt us to these sins, though the lesson of Job’s suffering is that we must watch diligently

for his lion-like and devouring presence (15).

If God gives me good things and then impoverishes me, I may not complain. I must confess that it was all His anyway. If God gives me health and then takes it away, I may not be discontent but must acknowledge that my very existence is a gift from Him. If God gives me a child and then takes that child away, I must not be angry with Him but confess that it was a privilege to have that child for a short time and be thankful for the short time that child was in my arms and my home. What Job did in his trials, I must do in mine (20).

The longest and most difficult part of Job is the series of speeches, the back-and-forth between Job and Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. What are we to make of these long, poetic speeches? Are these men speaking the truth to Job: if so, why does God sharply rebuke them at the end of the book; if not, why are they found in inspired Scripture? The answer, as Hanko explains it, is that these men do speak truth (what they say is factually correct), but they misapply the truth to Job. This misapplication is *sin*.

How are we to understand their speeches to Job, which God calls folly and for which He condemns them (Job 42:8)? A careful reading of their words shows a deep knowledge of God and reverence for Him. What they say is not in itself wrong. Calvin calls it “pure truth” and the “foundations of religion.” They do not lie as Satan did, but though their words are factually correct they are misapplied in the case of Job and therefore are folly. Misinterpreting and misapplying the word of God is sin against the third commandment, the sin of taking God’s name in vain... It is as much a sin as lying. God’s later condemnation of their speeches confirms this (27).

In other words, Job’s friends are believers, they are pious men, and they have a grasp of good doctrine. They understand God’s sovereignty, His holiness and righteousness, His punishment of evildoers and His vindication of the righteous, but they misread God’s providence and they make terrible charges of sin against Job, which are entirely unwarranted. Hanko warns that we are prone to this sin:

There is a warning for us in that. It is easy to think that because we quote the Word of God, our words must be true and right; but misapplying them is as great a sin as misquoting them. In the case of Job's friends, their sin was such that atoning sacrifice and intercessory prayer were necessary. We commit their sin and need forgiveness when we apply the Word of God to others and not to ourselves as we ought to do. We commit their sin when we use the Word of God to condemn others harshly, unjustly, and without a hearing. We commit their sin when we use God's Word to number fellow believers among the ungodly and unbelieving, banishing them from our hearts and lives. The Word must be handled carefully and not deceitfully (29).

We must take others at their word unless we have clear and unmistakable evidence to the contrary... We do not think, suspect, or charge others with evildoing unless we have proof, and even then, of course, pointing out their sin must be done humbly and carefully and within the guidelines of Matthew 18. Not only must we have proof, but the proof must be sustainable...

Eliphaz ... sins against charity in his judgment of Job, in his twisting of Job's own words, and in his refusal to take Job at his word (65).

As difficult as it is to read of how Job was treated by his friends, it is something that happens often. In controversy and disagreement, charity, kindness, and mercy are quickly forgotten (66).

Job himself insists upon his integrity throughout the book—he is not guilty of some gross public sin, despite the feverish imaginations and the uncharitable suspicions of his friends. However, Job was not a man without sin: Job's sin was his questioning of God's ways and his repeated demands for an answer from the Almighty. That was his folly, and yet how easy it is for us to fall into such sinful questioning of our Father! Again and again Hanko exposes this sin and warns against it:

Questioning God's ways seems such a small thing, but it is not small in God's eyes, for He will not give His glory to another. Job had to learn that God is God. Our children learn this lesson when we refuse to answer their persistent

“Why?” insisting that they must submit to our authority because we are their parents. We must all learn that lesson in relation to God. Submission is unquestioning and bows without knowing (52)

Still he does not realize that by putting God to the questions he wishes to ask, he is sinning against God. Whether he sins in expressing his hopelessness and desire to die, God only knows, for God never charges him with sin in that respect. In demanding an answer to his “why” he does sin and sins grievously, and that, too, is a lesson for all of us who suffer. God will overlook the language we use in expressing our grief and sorrow, but He will not overlook our asking Him to explain His ways to us (70).

To ask why is to set ourselves on the throne of God and call Him to account as though He is nothing more than a cringing menial in relation to us. It is a denial of His lordship and absolute sovereignty. When finally we do understand, then we will do as Job did: we will put our hand on our mouth and be silent. Not only is questioning a denial of God’s sovereignty, but it is a denial of salvation

by grace alone. We have no works, no merit, that earn for us an answer to our questions. Our standing with God is all through the righteousness of Jesus Christ, and in Him alone we must rest. We, too, when we question God’s ways and think we cannot be at peace unless He explains Himself to us, will find Him a God who hides Himself. He is there always to sympathize, to help, to soothe, but He will not be there to stand prisoner at the bar of our questions and to be judged by us (96).

Poor Job—suffering, seeking answers and finding none, while his friends mercilessly assail him! Yet the book ends with a display of God’s mercy: “Ye have heard of the patience of Job and have seen the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy” (James 5:11). God appears: He reproves, and *He forgives*—He forgives Job and He forgives Job’s friends, and, as the fruit of that forgiveness, Job forgives the harsh words of his friends. God’s merciful goal, writes Hanko, is “Job’s growth in grace, stronger faith in his redeemer and in the resurrection of the body, and greater insight into the majesty and greatness of God, a worthy end indeed” (133).

Protestant Reformed Theological Journal

This is a delightful little book, the person and history of Job. I full of penetrating insights into recommend it highly. ●