

LESSON 2

JOB

GOD'S PRESENCE IN THE STORM

WHEN I LIVED IN BRAZIL, I took my mom and her friend to see Iguacu Falls, the largest waterfalls in the world. Some weeks earlier I'd become an expert on the cataracts by reading an article in *National Geographic* magazine. Surely, I thought, my guests would appreciate their good fortune in having me as a guide.

To reach the lookout point, tourists must walk a winding trail that leads them through a forest. I took advantage of the hike to give an Iguacu nature report to my mom and her friend. So full of information I was, I chattered the entire time. After some minutes, however, I caught myself speaking louder and louder. A sound in the distance forced me to raise my voice. With each turn in the trail, my volume increased. Finally, I was shouting above a roar which was proving to be quite irritating. *Whatever that noise is, I wish they'd shut it off so I could complete my lecture.*

Only after reaching the clearing did I realize that the noise we heard was the waterfalls. My words were drowned out by the force and fury of what I was trying to describe. I could no longer be heard. Even if I could, I no longer had an audience. Even my mother would rather see the splendor than hear my description. I shut my mouth.

There are times when to speak is to violate the moment . . . when silence represents the highest respect. The word for such times is reverence. The prayer for such times is, "Hallowed be thy name." Only you and God are here, and you can surmise who occupies the throne.

This was a lesson Job learned. If he had a fault, it was his tongue. He talked too much. Not that anyone could blame him. Calamity pounced on the man like a lioness on a herd of gazelles, and by the time the rampage passed, there was hardly a wall standing or a loved one living. And it all happened in *one day*. One moment Job could choose his tee time at the nicest golf course in the country; the next he couldn't even be the caddie. One moment he could Learjet across the country to see the heavyweight bout at the Las Vegas Mirage. The next he couldn't afford a city bus across town.

Talk about calm becoming chaos . . .

"Our Father in heaven, hallowed by your name" (Matthew 6:9)

In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. . . . He was the greatest man among all the people of the East (Job 1:1,3).

“The oxen were plowing and the donkeys were grazing nearby, and the Sabeans attacked and made off with them. . . . The fire of God fell from the heavens and burned up the sheep and the servants. . . . The Chaldeans formed three raiding parties and swept down on your camels. . . . Your sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother’s house . . . it collapsed on them and they are dead” (Job 1:13–19).

The first thing to go is his empire. The market crashes; his assets tumble. What is liquid goes dry. What has been up goes down. Stocks go flat, and Job goes broke. There he sits in his leather chair at his soon-to-be-auctioned-off mahogany desk when the phone rings with news of calamity number two: the kids were at a resort for the holidays when a storm blew in and took them with it.

Shell-shocked and dumbfounded, Job looks out the window into the sky that seems to be getting darker by the minute. He starts praying, telling God that things can’t get any worse . . . and that’s exactly what happens.

1. Read Job 1:13–22 and think about all the calamities that affected Job in that one day. What do you think his thoughts would have been when each messenger arrived? What does his ultimate response to the crisis say about his character?

2. What circumstances and situations are darkening your sky right now? What is your reaction to those events? What questions are you asking? What are your thoughts about and emotions toward God?

If indeed there is such a thing as the “school of hard knocks,” Job may well have been its founder. At the very least, he was its star pupil. This man of God received a doctorate-level education in theology, counseling, and a host of other subjects in the midst of the most devastating circumstances imaginable. And one of the first things Job learned—as you’ll discover in the first study—is that where there is tragedy, there are always people who claim to understand why it is happening.

— PRAYER FOR THE WEEK —

Heavenly Father, thank you for the life-changing lessons found in the story of Job. Thank you for revealing yourself to be patient, gracious, and understanding even when we are at our worst. Please bless our efforts to understand you better in the midst of our suffering. Help us learn from Job’s experience so we may honor you. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Day One: Why Is This Happening?

SOME LESS-THAN-HELPFUL ADVICE

Job hasn't even had time to call Allstate before he sees the leprosy on his hands and the boils on his skin. His wife, compassionate soul that she is, tells him to "curse God and die." Who could blame her for being upset at the week's calamities? Who could blame her for telling Job to curse God? But to curse God *and die*? If Job doesn't already feel abandoned, he does the minute his wife tells him to pull the plug and be done with it.

Next come his four friends with the bedside manner of drill sergeants and the compassion of chainsaw killers. A revised version of their theology might read like this: "Boy, you must have done something really bad! We know that God is good, so if bad things are happening to you, then you have been bad. Period." As sure as two-plus-two equals four, Job must have some criminal record in his past to suffer so.

Each friend has his own interpretation of God, and each speaks long and loud about who God is and why God did what he has done. They aren't the only ones talking about God. When his accusers pause, Job gives his response.

"Job cried out . . ." (Job 3:1 NCV).

"Then Eliphaz the Temanite answered . . ." (4:1 NCV).

"Then Job answered . . ." (6:1 NCV).

"Then Bildad the Shuhite answered . . ." (8:1 NCV).

"Then Job answered . . ." (9:1 NCV).

"Then Zophath the Naamathite answered . . ." (11:1 NCV).

Back and forth they go. Finally, Job says, "You are doctors who don't know what they are doing. Oh, please be quiet! That would be your highest wisdom" (Job 13:4–5 TLB). Translation? "Why don't you take your philosophy back to the pigpen where you learned it."

1. In Proverbs 15:22 we read, "Without counsel, plans go awry, but in the multitude of counselors they are established" (NKJV). Job certainly had a "multitude of counselors," but they proved to be of no help to him in this situation. What nuggets of advice do Job's three friends give in the following verses?

Eliphaz the Temanite: Job 4:7; 5:8; 15:20; 22:21–22

Satan . . . afflicted Job with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head. . . . His wife said to him, "Are you still maintaining your integrity? Curse God and die!" (Job 2:7–9).

When Job's three friends . . . heard about all the troubles that had come upon him, they set out from their homes . . . to go and sympathize with him and comfort him (v. 11).

"You, however, smear me with lies; you are worthless physicians, all of you! If only you would be altogether silent!" (13:4–5).

Bildad the Shuhite: Job 8:5-6; 18:2-3; 25:4

Zophath the Naamathite: Job 11:13-15; 20:6-7

2. Every counselor has an agenda. Most have a genuine desire to help; others have a genuine desire to be seen as wise; and some have ulterior motives. How can a suffering person like Job discern the motives of his or her would-be counselors? What makes a person a good counselor in times of need?

3. Who would likely offer you counsel when your sky grows dark? What would that person say? Whose counsel would be most welcome to you? Why?

4. Who might turn to *you* for comfort or advice when his or her sky grows dark? What would you say?

A GOOD MAN IN HIS OWN EYES

Job is, in his eyes, a good man. "I paid my taxes. I'm active in civic duties. I'm a major contributor to United Way and a volunteer at the hospital bazaar." And, a good man, he reasons, deserves a good answer.

"Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him; I will surely defend my ways to his face" (Job 13:15).

“Your suffering is for your own good,” states Elihu, a young minister fresh out of seminary who hasn’t lived long enough to be cynical and hasn’t hurt enough to be quiet. He paces back and forth in the hospital room, with his Bible under his arm and his finger punching the air.

“God does all these things to a man—twice, even three times—to turn back his soul from the pit, that the light of life may shine on him” (Job 33:29–30 NLV).

Job follows his pacing like you’d follow a tennis player, head turning from side to side. What the young man says isn’t bad theology, but it isn’t much comfort either. Job steadily tunes him out and slides lower and lower under the covers. His head hurts. His eyes burn. His legs ache. And he can’t stomach any more hollow homilies.

Yet his question still hasn’t been answered: “God, why is this happening to me?”

Elihu had waited before speaking to Job because they were older than he (Job 33:4).

“God does all these things to a person . . . to turn them back from the pit” (vv. 29–30).

5. Read Job 32:1–5. Why did Elihu feel compelled to speak up and state his opinions at this point in the story?

6. Why is Elihu angry with Job? Why is he angry with Job’s three friends? Do think his anger was justified?

7. Homilies and platitudes are as popular today as they were in Job’s day. Put yourself in Job’s position. How would you respond to someone who said . . .

“God never gives you more than you can handle”?

“Everything happens for a reason”?

“What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger”?

“There are other people in this world who have it worse than you do”?

8. Read Job 36:2-4. From what authority does Elihu say he derives his knowledge? What is the danger in claiming to speak on “God’s behalf”?

The longer Job’s friends spoke, the more frustrated he grew. Their words certainly gave the appearance of being profound, but ultimately for Job they were empty. His friends didn’t know what he was going through. Not really. They couldn’t empathize with his situation, so Job decided to set them straight. And, as we’ll see in the next study, in so doing Job spoke for all those whose pain and suffering has ever caused them to question God.

POINTS TO REMEMBER

- ❖ Many people have interpretations of God, but we have to remember that God’s ways are always higher than our own (see Isaiah 55:8).
- ❖ Job was a good man, but even good men have no right to demand anything of God.
- ❖ While what Job’s friends said to him might have represented good theology, it was of no comfort to him—and of little use to him.

PRAYER FOR THE DAY

Father, thank you for your faithfulness. Thank you for never deserting us in our time of need, even when we push you away. Thank you for your Word, which is never empty or shallow but always capable of giving us comfort and insight into your work. Help us recognize your presence and keep our minds free of teachings that do not represent your truth. In Jesus’ name, amen.