

A Sufferer's Complaint

Today also my complaint is bitter; my hand is heavy on account of my groaning.
Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his seat!
I would lay my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments.” - Job 23:2-3

William Cowper, English poet and friend of John Newton, had a lifelong struggle with depression. His condition became even worse when personal tragedy struck: a beloved brother died at the age of forty-three, leaving Cowper not only with grief, but with the burden of his brother's debts. Less than two years later, two of his cousins also died.

One of Cowper's poems, “The Castaway,” expresses how overwhelmed he felt. This poem describes a sailor who has fallen overboard into a stormy ocean. His shipmates tried in vain to rescue him, but eventually had to give up the effort. Finally, writes Cowper, “he drank / The stifling wave, and then he sank.” As terrible as it would be to drown in a pitiless ocean, Cowper closes the poem by claiming that his condition feels even worse: “I [am] beneath a rougher sea, and whelmed in deeper gulfs than he.”

The Biblical character Job also felt overwhelmed by sorrow—he had lost his children, his wealth, and his health—and to make matters worse, he believed that God was ultimately responsible for his losses. Unlike his accusatory friends, Job refused to believe that these tragedies were God's way of punishing him for sin. So why would God allow this to happen?

As we consider “a sufferer's complaint” from the book of Job, we must somehow condense the lengthy dialogues by considering just three selections: (1) the sufferer's complaint in 23:1-10, (2) the Sovereign's challenge in 38:1-7, and (3) the sufferer's confession in 42:1-6.

1. The Sufferer's Complaint - Job 23:1-10

Job complains that God has allowed him to suffer far too much, and without sufficient cause. Although he did not claim to be sinless, Job also refused to agree with his friends that his suffering was due to some heinous sin he had committed.

“I would lay my case before him,” Job declares, “and fill my mouth with arguments. I would know what he would answer me and understand what he would say to me” (Job 23:4-5). In this and in Job's many other anguished speeches, we hear this common theme: “God, I haven't given up on you, but you have a lot of explaining to do!”

It is important to note that Job's complaint is not a curse, which is what Satan predicted Job would do (Job 1:11) and what his wife advised Job to do (Job 2:9). There is a difference between complaining to God and cursing God, and it is essential to know the difference. To curse God is to turn one's back on him, to give up trusting him. To complain is to cling to God, while at the same time being utterly honest about one's confusion about why God would allow such suffering.

2. The Sovereign's Challenge - Job 38:1-7

When God finally answers Job, he speaks “out of the whirlwind” which in itself teaches us something: prosperity can muffle God's voice, but pain can be God's megaphone. In other words, we tend to hear God's voice more clearly in times of suffering than in times of peace.

Job's friends probably expected God to condemn and humiliate Job: “Job, how dare you defend yourself, when it's clear you are suffering my judgment!” Job, on his part, wanted God to say something like, “Job, you're right; I overdid it on the suffering”—or at least provide a satisfying explanation for the suffering.

But God did neither of these things. He did not condemn Job, but neither did he let him off the hook! He confronted Job with the vastness and power of his own Being—so vast that no human being could fully comprehend his ways. “Will you put me in the wrong?” God asks Job, “Will you condemn me that you may be in the right? Have you an arm like God, and can you thunder with a voice like his?” (Job 40:9).

God’s challenging questions, “are designed to show Job his finiteness and smallness,” to prove to him that God has his reasons for what he does, and that it is beyond the power of a puny human being to understand (Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty*, p. 246).

It is incredibly significant that God presents to Job the vastness and power of his own being rather than answers to Job’s questions. “What makes life worth living is not the absence of suffering but rather a relationship with the living God” (Schreiner, p. 248).

3. The Sufferer’s Confession - Job 42:1-6

Job’s confession, after hearing from God, shows that Job understood this. “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you” (Job 42:5). That is, Job had come to experience God in a greater way, and that was more important than getting his questions answered. When Job says, “therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes,” he was not saying that he himself was worthless; rather that he was repudiating his claim that God owed him an explanation. God had shown himself to Job, and that was enough.

In this way, Job’s confidence was validated: he *did* “come forth as gold” tried in the fire (23:10). He grew in his adoration and worship of God *as* God, not merely as he wished him to be. From this we learn an amazing lesson about God himself: an experience of God’s presence is so overwhelmingly satisfying that even the most intense suffering needs no explanation. As King David put it: “You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Psalm 16:11).

But we can go even further and say that there *is* an explanation for Job’s suffering: a spiritual battle was being waged. On the one side is Satan, trying to discredit God’s character by claiming that God’s people serve him only for what God gives them. On the other side is God, upholding his character and protecting his people. So even while we may not know how all the pieces of the puzzle fit together, God shows us the big picture: he is working out all things for our good and his glory.

William Cowper, although often blasted by doubts and depression, understood this as well. He penned the lines to a poem he called “Light Shining Out of Darkness”—

*God moves in a mysterious way,
His wonders to perform;
He plants his footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never-failing skill,
He treasures up his bright designs,
And works his sov'reign will.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take,
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.*

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust him for his grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding ev'ry hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flow'r.

Blind unbelief is sure to err,
And scan his work in vain;
God is his own interpreter,
And he will make it plain.*

Discussion and Application Questions

There are many helpful questions here. Choose at least five to discuss.

1. How does Job's complaint in 23:1-10 resonate with experiences of suffering or confusion in your own life?
2. In what ways do you differentiate between complaining to God and cursing God, based on Job's example? How can honesty about our confusion and questions strengthen our relationship with God during times of suffering?
3. Consider the idea that prosperity can muffle God's voice, but pain can be God's megaphone. How has pain or difficulty shaped your spiritual journey?
4. How do you interpret God's challenge to Job in Job 38:1-7? What does this reveal about God's character? Discuss the concept that God's challenging questions are meant to show Job his finiteness and smallness. How might recognizing our own limitations impact our understanding of God's ways?
5. Explore the idea that what makes life worth living is not the absence of suffering but a relationship with the living God. How has your relationship with God sustained you through difficult times?
6. How does Job's confession in Job 42:1-6 highlight the shift from knowing *about* God to *experiencing* God? Have you experienced a similar shift?
7. Discuss the significance of Job realizing that his questions were less important than the experience of God's presence. How might this perspective shift influence our own approach to suffering and questioning?
8. Reflect on the idea that an experience of God's presence is so satisfying that even intense suffering needs no explanation. How does this perspective challenge common views on theodicy?
9. How can the concept of a spiritual battle, as described in the text, influence the way we perceive and endure suffering?
10. Consider the closing lines of Cowper's poem, in which Cowper draws upon the Scriptural imagery of God as Lord of the storm (Psalm 18:10-12, Nahum 1:3, Matthew 14:22-33). How can the imagery of God planting his footsteps in the sea and riding upon the storm provide comfort and assurance in uncertain times?