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THE SILENCE OF GOD

Reflective readers of the Book of Job may find various issues rather bewildering. Some may wonder why God would allow someone who is innocent and righteous like Job to suffer so intensely for apparently no good reason. Besides, his sufferings did not seem to benefit anyone.

Others may feel that Job was an innocent, helpless object of contest between two powerful, supernatural beings—God and Satan. He appeared to be like a toy or a plaything in a game between these two powerful beings.

I have heard this sentiment being expressed by a non-Christian contemplating the existence of God and the happenings in the lives of men. It seemed to him that, if God does exist, we are merely His playthings.

There are also those who may wonder why God did not address Job's perplexing questions when He spoke at length at the end of the story. Job did raise legitimate questions and issues of significance. Furthermore, some may wonder about the relevance of the content of God's long speeches to what was happening. Why did Job not seem disturbed or dissatisfied with God's response but instead repented and worshipped God although God did not seem to have addressed the issues he raised? Thus, the beautiful ending to the story of Job may appear unrealistic.

Such thoughts can easily come to those who do not subscribe to the authority and inspiration of the Scriptures, and these people may express their views in their writings or in other ways. Sadly, some believers may come under the influence of such views without being conscious of the implications. Over time, they too begin to question the character and ways of God and the authority of the Scriptures. Ironically, an important lesson that the Book of Job is trying to teach us is that we should not question or have doubts about the character and ways of God.

What then should we do when we are confounded by some of the difficult issues that arise from our reading of the Book of Job? Should we put them aside and not think about them? The answer is clearly no. It is not only legitimate for us to try to understand them; it is our responsibility to do so, prayerfully looking to God to grant us insight. In fact, the Book of Job, if properly understood, can teach us many deep and meaningful truths.

What we have to guard against is the drawing of improper conclusions that contradict the perfect character and ways of God or other truths that are clearly taught in the Scriptures. We do not have to be unduly disturbed if, after prayerful study, we are

still unable to grasp some of the issues involved. We can defer them for the time being. In the future, we may be able to understand them. Since the Scriptures is inspired by the infinitely wise God, we cannot expect to understand all the issues straightaway.

Theme of message

In this message, I want to concentrate on the issue of *why God did not answer Job's perplexing questions* at the end of the story of Job, as recorded in the Scriptures. What I will cover can help us in several ways, for example:

- Appreciating the beauty, meaning and depth in the Scriptures; the value of studying the Scriptures; and the need to exercise care in the way we interpret difficult passages and grapple with issues
- Appreciating the wisdom of God
- Learning important lessons pertaining to the life of faith

Did God treat Job unfairly?

We may be puzzled why God did not answer Job's perplexing questions. On the face of it, it may appear that God had treated Job unfairly, brushing him aside because He is greater and more powerful, and thus Job had no choice but to submit.

It may also seem that God did not show any understanding towards Job in his intense suffering and plight, especially as we look at the way God spoke and rebuked Job. Job had lost his possessions and his sons and daughters. He had been misunderstood, abused and wrongly accused. He had suffered intense physical and emotional pains as well as spiritual pressures and afflictions. Yet, when God entered the scene in Job 38 and spoke, He did not show any sympathy or empathy towards Job.

Job 38:2-5

2 "Who is this that darkens counsel

By words without knowledge?

3 "Now gird up your loins like a man,

And I will ask you, and you instruct Me!

4 "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

Tell Me, if you have understanding,

5 Who set its measurements? Since you know.

Or who stretched the line on it?"

In the above passage, we see God rebuking Job and asking him a series of hard questions. There is no indication of Him sympathising with Job and his sufferings and pains. In Job 40, we see a similar thrust:

Job 40:1-9

1 Then the Lord said to Job,
2 "Will the faultfinder contend with the Almighty?"
Let him who reproves God answer it."
3 Then Job answered the Lord and said,
4 "Behold, I am insignificant; what can I reply to You?"
I lay my hand on my mouth.
5 "Once I have spoken, and I will not answer;
Even twice, and I will add nothing more."
6 Then the Lord answered Job out of the storm and said,
7 "Now gird up your loins like a man;
I will ask you, and you instruct Me.
8 "Will you really annul My judgment?
Will you condemn Me that you may be justified?"
9 "Or do you have an arm like God,
And can you thunder with a voice like His?"

When we read passages like those above, we may get the impression that God was simply exerting His power to subdue Job and force him to submit to Him. We may then have negative feelings about God, thinking that He was unfair to Job. And yet we know that God's response to the situation must have been a wise one because He is the God of perfect wisdom.

Such unfavourable sentiments that may come to us is a reminder that sometimes a person's response or conduct may appear to be harsh and lacking in understanding, yet in reality it may be a wise and appropriate response.

But more importantly, it is crucial that we do not harbour or entertain negative thoughts or feelings about God. We must be mindful that the evil one is actively at work to evoke and promote within us such negative sentiments.

Does God demand submission on the basis of His power?

God is not One who will demand submission on the sole basis of His power. Job, even in the midst of his trials, pains and perplexities, could recognise this and was confident that God is not such a God. We see his thoughts in Job 23:

Job 23:3-7

3 "Oh that I knew where I might find Him,
That I might come to His seat!
4 "I would present my case before Him
And fill my mouth with arguments.

- 5 "I would learn the words which He would answer,
And perceive what He would say to me.
6 "Would He contend with me by the greatness of His power?
No, surely He would pay attention to me.
7 "There the upright would reason with Him;

As Job says in the above passage, God is open to reason and not One who would simply overwhelm and overcome us by the sheer weight of His almighty power. To have contrary thoughts is harmful and dangerous. Yet at times, we may subconsciously hold on to such concepts in our minds.

If our basis of submission is power, that is, if we submit to a being simply because he is very powerful, we can end up submitting to Satan because he is also a very powerful being. We may end up doing evil things, while still thinking we are obeying God. God does not want us to submit to Him and worship Him merely because He is powerful.

Related to this is that if we worship God on the premise that He is very powerful, the meaning of true worship is dealt a mortal blow. This erroneous approach in worshipping God hits at the very heart of true worship. True worship involves a positive moral dimension. It involves a positive moral response from our hearts, which may not be present if we worship God merely because He is powerful.

We have to be clear about our reasons for worshipping, loving and serving God wholeheartedly. Is it merely because God is powerful? No. We do so because He is both great and good, because He is perfect in His being and ways. More crucial than the issue of power is the moral perfection of God. If God is not morally perfect, we cannot properly worship Him. The Scriptures reveals very clearly both God's moral perfection and His almighty power. Both of these realities in the being of God are vital to a meaningful, wholehearted worship of God and to our submission to Him without reservation. They assure us of the good and perfect will of God and that His guidance and instructions are absolutely reliable and ought to be followed.

We also saw that Job had sufficient recognition of God's goodness and greatness. Therefore, we must not interpret the story of Job in the wrong way, thinking that God had been unfair to Job and forcing submission upon him.

Was God silent because He had no adequate answer to Job's questions?

We may wonder whether it would be helpful to Job if God had answered his perplexing questions. If Job had understood God's intentions for the trials, would it not be helpful for his personal development and would it not enable Job to have a clearer basis for joyful, wholehearted submission to God? This may sound reasonable, but, as will be explained shortly, the approach that God adopted as recorded in the Scriptures is better and more effective.

Some may think that God did not attempt to answer Job because there is no adequate or satisfying answer to the problem of suffering, at least not one that man on earth can understand. In fact, this point may sometimes be put forward as the main lesson or one of the main lessons of the story of Job.

In reality, the way God responded to Job's situation, the content of His speeches, and the fact that He did not answer Job's puzzling questions were *deliberate, very appropriate, meaningful and effective* in the context and were an expression of His perfect wisdom. God did not brush Job aside. Neither did He treat Job in a contemptuous manner, nor fail to show an understanding of how Job felt.

It is recorded in the Scriptures that even to the sinful, rebellious nation of Israel, God was gracious and did not simply brush them aside. This is illustrated in Isaiah 1:18-20.

Isaiah 1:18-20

18 "Come now, and let us reason together,"

Says the Lord,

"Though your sins are as scarlet,

They will be as white as snow;

Though they are red like crimson,

They will be like wool.

19 "If you consent and obey,

You will eat the best of the land;

20 "But if you refuse and rebel,

You will be devoured by the sword."

Truly, the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Here, we find that God was displeased with the nation of Israel because they had committed many sins that were deeply provocative to Him. Yet, in such a context, God was willing to reason out with them, saying, "Come now, and let us reason together".

In the case of Job, even though he could not fully understand all the issues, there was still much that God could have helped him understand if that was the best thing to do. For example, God could have helped Job recognise and understand the existence and work of the evil one, the issues that were important for his development, and the meaning behind what he was going through. Hence, we can say that God remained silent not because He had no adequate answer to Job's suffering, but because He had other reasons for doing so.

Why did God not answer Job's perplexing questions?

If we reflect on the reasons for God's silence with regard to Job's perplexities, we can see that there are deep, meaningful and vital issues for Job and for us to learn. I see at least two main reasons and I will state them as follows:

- The need to learn to trust God fully and without wavering while going through difficult and perplexing situations
- The need to appreciate the underlying issues that are crucial to our relationship with God and to a life of faith

1. Trusting God fully without wavering

If we desire to attain to a high quality of faith, it is very important that we learn to trust God fully and without wavering while going through difficult and perplexing situations. This was one key lesson that God wanted Job to learn.

As objective observers of what took place in the life of Job, we can see that the appropriate response of Job in the midst of his suffering and perplexities ought to be that of persevering in unwavering faith in the great and good God. Likewise, we need to apply this posture and attitude to our own lives because it is an area that believers are very vulnerable in and will be tested on from time to time. If we do not resolve this issue deeply, then when we are severely tested, we may experience a crisis that shakes the very foundation of our faith in God and our relationship with Him. Even in the absence of severe testing, queries and doubts may arise occasionally in the minds of some. This kind of faith is superficial, has little quality in it and can easily be shaken especially in the context of living in the fallen world, the weakness of the flesh and the evil one actively at work.

To have a relationship with God and a faith that is stable and of quality, we have to settle this issue very deeply and definitely, bearing in mind that God is infinite in His knowledge and wisdom, while man is finite with many limitations. Isaiah 55:8-9 contains helpful words for us in this direction:

Isaiah 55:8-9

8 "For My thoughts are not your thoughts,
Nor are your ways My ways," declares the Lord.
9 "For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are My ways higher than your ways
And My thoughts than your thoughts.

The above passage emphasises the greatness of God with regard to His thoughts, His wisdom and His knowledge in comparison with finite man and his limitations. We will not be able to fully understand God's mind and ways. There may also be things inappropriate for us to know.

How do we firmly resolve this issue of trusting God in the midst of difficulties? To do so, we need to recognise that our faith must be grounded in the person and being of God. He is the Almighty God of perfect love, faithfulness and wisdom, whom we have come to know and believe. As Paul puts it in 2 Timothy 1:12,

2 Timothy 1:12

For this reason I also suffer these things, but I am not ashamed; for I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day.

Paul was not only willing to suffer but he could rejoice in his sufferings (Col. 1:24). One main factor that helped him to carry on properly as he went through various difficulties was his deep conviction that he knew whom he believed in. His confidence and faith in God were grounded in his knowledge of the being of God, independent of situations and issues.

Similarly, our faith should be grounded in the being of God, and should not be conditional on or linked to situations and issues. Otherwise, it will always be unstable. Our faith in God can be maintained without wavering because God is unchangingly perfect, wise and faithful. We know that this is true and so we can continually and steadfastly trust Him and carry on untroubled in the midst of issues beyond our understanding.

At the same time, we recognise that though we may be perplexed and may not have answers to our questions, the all-knowing God is never perplexed and He is sovereignly undertaking.

2. Underlying issues that are crucial to a life of faith

The second reason for God not answering Job could be because of the underlying issues that are crucial to a life of faith. What were the real issues involved in relation to Job's failures? Was it merely a lack of knowledge? Was it merely perplexing questions in his mind that were not answered?

Wisdom of God's approach

By not answering Job's perplexities, it helped Job (and it also helps us) to reflect on them and come to a deeper appreciation of the underlying issues that are crucial to quality faith and relationship with God. These issues are related to deficiencies in Job and God wanted them to emerge and be made clear to him. By dealing with the situation the way He did, God helped Job to see clearly that it was not essential for him to receive the answers to his perplexing questions in order to respond appropriately. Instead, there were deficiencies within Job that he must recognise and deal with deeply.

If God had answered Job's perplexing questions, it may not come through so clearly and powerfully to Job and to us that the real problem did not lie in the unanswered questions, but in the deficiency in his posture and the spirit of humility, and the loss of focus on God during the trials. Furthermore, these issues would have become blurred. Job might then attribute his failures to the perplexing questions that confronted him instead of recognising the need to take corrective measures for the deficiencies within him. He might believe that once his perplexities were resolved, he could respond well to God.

The beauty and depth of Job's response at the end might have been hindered if God had answered his perplexing questions. He might not have come to the point where he could worship and humbly submit to God and continue to believe in the greatness, goodness and wisdom of God, even while still severely afflicted and in deep pain, and while still unaware that it was Satan who was afflicting him.

As Job recognised his areas of deficiencies and took corrective measures, his pride and improper ways of speaking to God were cast away. He recognised what the proper position before God should be and this led to a higher quality of faith and deeper relationship with God.

Through the manifestation of two aspects of His being in His speeches—His majesty, greatness and power, and His wisdom and knowledge—God struck at the root of the underlying issues and corrected Job's real problems of improper posture, lack of humility and the loss of focus on God.

If God had adopted a different approach

Supposing God's approach to Job was more "sympathetic" and "understanding", what then would be the outcome and meaning of Job's response? If God had spoken to Job along this line: "Well, Job, I know that it has been a very difficult time for you. I understand how you feel and though you have faltered, it is understandable that you have spoken in the way you did because of the severity of the testing, and this has been accentuated by many baffling questions in your mind. To help you respond properly, I will explain to you what has been happening. I will now answer all your perplexing questions."

Now, would this approach have been better? If we reflect on it, we will appreciate that the meaning and positive outcome of the whole experience that Job went through would have been significantly compromised.

And yet, many of us may prefer to be dealt with in this way by God, directly or through His servants, even though at times it would have been better that we are given the same treatment as Job. The "sympathetic" and "understanding" treatment that we prefer may not always be the most appropriate or the most effective because the clarity of issues may be blurred and the depth of response could be hindered.

In trying to appreciate the way God dealt with Job, we noted that a basic problem and deficiency in Job as manifested during the trials was the lack of humility. We saw this in the improper words used, and in his conduct and posture towards God. There was a demanding tone, and Job wrongly attributed deficiencies to the character and the ways of God. There was also the lack of reverence for God in some of his words. On some occasions, a spirit of arrogance came through. Though we need to bear in mind the severity of the trials that he went through, still the problem of a lack in humility was something God was very concerned about.

Job 10:1-4 gives an example of Job's improper spirit:

Job 10:1-4

1 "I loathe my own life;
I will give full vent to my complaint;
I will speak in the bitterness of my soul.
2 "I will say to God, 'Do not condemn me;
Let me know why You contend with me.
3 'Is it right for You indeed to oppress,
To reject the labor of Your hands,
And to look favorably on the schemes of the wicked?
4 'Have You eyes of flesh?
Or do You see as a man sees?

The tone reflected in the words of Job was irreverent and there was a lack of the spirit of submission to God.

Instead of adopting a "sympathetic" and "understanding" approach, God's approach was to answer Job out of the whirlwind. By doing so, it came through strongly to Job that he had limitations, was a finite being, and that it was improper for him to speak to the majestic, great and wise God in that manner. God needed to put Job in his proper position and to help him realise that it was wrong for him to speak in that manner to God or about God.

It was necessary for Job to humble himself before God first before the issue of answering his perplexing questions could be considered. In the spirit and state that he was in, he would not be so receptive to God nor be able to consider the issues properly.

Rather than not being understanding towards Job, God understood him perfectly and dealt with him effectively according to what was most appropriate in the situation.

In all likelihood, Job did learn rather deeply as a result of the whole experience. He was transformed inwardly as the deficiencies within him were dealt with. The quality of his faith in God and relationship with Him were enhanced. He became better equipped to face future difficulties and testing. Should he encounter other perplexing situations in the future, he would less likely doubt and question God's character and

ways because God had helped him come to a point of proper submission and worship in the midst of severe testing even without his perplexities having been addressed.

What can we learn for ourselves?

As we appreciate the way God dealt with Job, we should also learn to appreciate the way God deals with us. Instead of murmuring and complaining or entertaining doubts when situations are problematic and bewildering to us and when the evil one plants doubts in our minds about God's goodness and fairness, let us appreciate and affirm our faith in God's sovereignty and His perfect wisdom. This should be our response even when we are unable to understand what is taking place and why God allows us to go through various trials. He is the perfect Teacher and our loving heavenly Father. He knows how to take care of us and train us.

And this includes the disciplining hand of God upon us when He rebukes us for various reasons, including deficiencies in our lives. It is necessary for us to respond positively to God's disciplining hand as part of our walk with Him. It may be painful and we naturally do not like it, but it is good for us especially if we are stubborn and unrepentant or if there are deficiencies and attitudes in us that require more painful dealings.

Hebrews 12:5-6 tells us the correct attitude to adopt when we are disciplined by the Lord:

Hebrews 12:5-6

5 and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons,
"My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
Nor faint when you are reprov'd by Him;
6 For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines,
And He scourges every son whom He receives."

When God disciplines us, it is part of His expression of love for us and He wants to deal with what is deficient in our lives. The goal of God's discipline is positive, that we may share His holiness (Heb. 12:11).

Hebrews 12:11

All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

Although the disciplining is painful, if we respond well, it will produce the peaceful fruit of righteousness. Our response and attitude towards God have a bearing on the way God deals with us, especially in the area of discipline and what He wants to teach us. If we are more open, humble and teachable, God may not need to discipline us so severely and painfully. On the other hand, if we are stubborn, proud

and unteachable, He may have to deal with us in a very painful way before we will awaken and learn. But remember, all this is done in love.

Should God have, after the whole episode, answered Job's questions?

Finally, one may ask whether it would have been helpful to Job, after his proper response at the end, for God to help him understand what happened, for example, to instruct him on the existence and work of the evil one.

It could well be that God did help Job understand and that is how we now have the whole story before us as recorded in the Scriptures. That is, the source of the story of Job comes from Job's understanding as God revealed to him after he had learned the lessons.

However, we cannot be certain that God did help Job understand. The fact that the Scriptures is silent on this point is meaningful and there is perhaps something important that God desires to teach us. God in His perfect wisdom may or may not explain certain things to us and we may not even understand why. But our faith in God and proper posture towards Him can and should continue. He may explain to us if He sees it fit, according to His perfect wisdom. But His silence should not perturb us. On our part, we should continue to adopt a healthy attitude, look to God, try to understand whatever is profitable and trust that in His perfect wisdom and sovereignty, God would do what is the best.

God may at times leave certain questions unanswered because of deficiencies or wrong attitudes within us. Often it is due to the lack of diligence on our part to seek for the answers. There are many things that God wants us to understand as part of our total development and partnership with Him. Prayerful consideration of issues and seeking to understand them from the Lord can help us to grow well and enable us to participate more fully and effectively in the fulfilment of His purposes.

Spiritual poverty and a poor level of understanding of the things pertaining to God's kingdom are common among God's people. This state of affairs is not in line with the will of God. He has revealed an inexhaustible wealth of knowledge in the Scriptures for our learning so that we can be properly equipped. Sadly, we have failed to appreciate much of it because of our lethargy and lack of spiritual hunger. We fail to make full use of all the opportunities that are available to us to attain to a fuller and more wholesome understanding of the truth.

But at times, it may not be due to these unhealthy features in our lives. There may be issues that God would not explain to us for the time being because it is not suitable for us at that stage of our development. We may not be able to understand or receive such knowledge properly at that point in time. Knowing more may become burdensome and weigh us down. There may be other issues that God would not

explain at all during our time on earth. There could be issues too difficult and complex for us to grasp and receive properly due to our limitations as finite men.

Whatever the reasons, we need to trust God's perfect wisdom, love and faithfulness, and we must learn to respect and submit to His sovereignty, realising that He knows what is best and what He is doing.

Let us be earnest and diligent to seek to understand whatever God wants us to know. There is much that God desires us to understand and grasp, which we often neglect and for this neglect we will have to give an account. This is a serious matter that has far reaching implications for our eternal well-being and God's kingdom. On the other hand, let us not be perturbed by the fact that there are areas and issues that God in His perfect wisdom may withhold from us.

This approach and attitude is part of the posture that I have been emphasising in these messages on Job—a wholehearted, unwavering love for and commitment and submission to God and His ways under all circumstances. If we love God and submit to Him, it means that whatever areas He sees fitting and good for us, we will pursue them relentlessly. If there are perplexing issues that He sees best not to help us understand, we would still worship, love and submit to Him wholeheartedly.

Question for reflection and discussion

Why did God not answer the questions that perplexed Job even till the end of the story of Job, as recorded in the Scriptures?

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