

January 2, 2022

SUFFERING, SOVEREIGNTY, AND OUR SAVIOR

Job 1-2

*(1 of 7 in a series through Job)*

On Monday, December 13 I turned my attention to the book of Job. The previous day (Sunday, December 12) I had finished the series of selected Psalms, and I'd scheduled two weeks (with Aaron and Tom preaching) to be able to get ready to start this seven-message series on Job. And yet I kept second-guessing myself on this series. Should we really spend nearly two months looking at Job? After all, much of the book is spent in an argument in which Job's friends are saying wrong things for which they're rebuked by God in the end. Maybe this book is more fitting for just a few sermons. That's why the first time we ever preached through the book at Cornerstone, we did it from a much higher altitude approach, preaching the book in three sermons. Not only did that seem like a fair way to approach the book at the time, but I also couldn't shake the story I remember hearing years ago of a preacher who started a multi-week series through Job that he decided to end very abruptly, right in the middle of the series, saying, "I'm not sure whose suffering has been most apparent in this sermon series—Job's, yours, or mine." And I haven't wanted a repeat of that. So, honestly, I've not only been hesitant to spend a number of weeks looking at Job, but I've been slow to come back to this book altogether. However, on that Monday that I set up to dive into the book, the need to preach this book felt great.

I'd soon find out that a young man related to some of our church members had died, and my friend was about to speak at his funeral. Another church member shared that she was going through some severe health struggles after having already been suffering from a disease that has taken so much from her. By the next Monday I'd received news that two other relatives of church members had died. More and more people I knew were suffering, and I thought to myself, "This might be a good time to reflect on suffering. This probably is a good time to look at Job and even be willing to spend a couple of months doing so." And so that's what we're starting this morning.

We don't know who wrote the book of Job, but we can guess that the events of the book probably took place sometime between Abraham and Moses in the biblical timeline. There are a few indicators that suggest this time. We don't know anything about the land of Uz where we're told Job lived (in v. 1), but we know that Abraham had a nephew named Uz (Gen 22:21), so it could be the land where he dwelt. Moreover, Job's lifespan seems to fit this timeline. By the time we get to the end of the book, it seems that Job dies after a life of about 200 years. Now, this is helpful because the Bible tells us that Abraham's father lived to be 205, but there was an ever-decreasing lifespan so that by the time you get to Moses, he dies at 120. Therefore, somewhere between Abraham and Moses fits that as well. Finally, we see in Job 1:5 that Job was offering burnt offerings on behalf of his family. And by the time you get to the law of Moses, this would have been the task of the priest and offerings were required to be done at the tabernacle. Therefore, for all these reasons, we can guess that the events of this book took

place sometime between Abraham and Moses.<sup>1</sup> So, if that helps you situation the timeline of the events of this story, there you go. But instead of doing too much on the background or setting of the book, I want to dive right in. So, here's what I want to do this morning. I want to first walk you through the story that is told in the first two chapters of this book, and then I want to make two observations from what we see in the story. So, first, the story.

The book begins with our introduction to Job. In the first three verses, we're told two things: he's righteous and he's wealthy. We read, "There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job, and that man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from Evil. There were born to him seven sons and three daughters. He possessed 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, and 500 female donkeys, and very many servants, so that this man was the greatest of all the people in the east" (1:1-3). Now, when the text says he's blameless, it doesn't mean he's sinless but that he is a man who walks in integrity, whose heart is bent toward the Lord and righteousness. And, those two elements—his righteousness and wealth—set the stage for a heavenly conversation that is to come, which brings us to our next scene.

The next crucial scene in the story takes place in heaven. We're told that the sons of God (a reference to the heavenly host) come and present themselves before God, and Satan is with them. And the Lord strikes up a conversation with Satan, asking what he's been doing, with Satan answering that he's just been wondering the earth. And, perhaps surprisingly (since Satan lives to make accusation against the Lord's people), the Lord asks, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?" (1:8). Now, the Lord's description of Job will be important for us to remember. Not only do we see that the Lord initiates what unfolds here, but he also notes that Job is blameless, upright, and turns away from evil. Indeed, the Lord even tells us there is none like him on earth. And the reason this is important is because when all these terrible things happen to Job and his friends tell him surely it's because he's done something wrong—while Job is defiantly insistent that that isn't the case—you might be tempted to think they're right and Job is one ignorant, self-righteous man. But don't forget the Lord's testimony about Job here. He's a righteous man. There is no one else like him on the earth.

But Satan will have none of what the Lord is saying. He points out that the Lord has given Job everything someone could want. He is living the dream. Who wouldn't worship if God gave him all that the Lord had given Job? "But," Satan declares, "stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face" (1:11). And the Lord responds by granting Satan permission to do whatever he wants, noting that Satan must observe one boundary. He can't touch Job himself.

And so Satan goes after Job relentlessly, and Job seemingly loses everything. His sons and daughters were having a bit of a feast at the older brother's house when a messenger comes up

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<sup>1</sup> David Jackson has made this observations in determining the timeline for the events of the book. *Crying out for Vindication: The Gospel According to Job* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 10-11.

to Job to tell him that the Sabeans attacked and killed Job's servants who were overseeing the oxen and donkeys so that the animals were taken and the servants are dead. Then, while that messenger was still speaking, another came up and said that "the fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and servants" (1:16). This is a reference to lightning, and I've read that a lightning strike on dry prairie grass can begin a fire that in windy conditions will spread with such speed that neither sheep nor shepherds could outrun it, and this is precisely what's taken place.<sup>2</sup> Then, while he was still speaking, a third messenger came to tell him that the Chaldeans made a raid on the camels, taking them and killing the servants. And finally, while that messenger was still speaking, a fourth arrived to tell Job that while his children were feasting at his brother's house, a strong wind came and caused the house to collapse on them, killing them all. Can you imagine all of that news coming at you nearly at once?

Now, this doesn't mean that all of these events transpired at the exact same moment or even on the same day. It may well have taken messengers some time—hours, days, weeks?—to get to Job. But the point is that the devil crafted these events to take place at such times that all the bad news came to Job nearly same moment. Again, it's hard to imagine a worse moment in one's life than this. Job had lost nearly everything and everyone dear to him.

And so if you're reading the story for the first time, you're no doubt wondering what Job will do? Is Satan right? Will Job curse God to his face? Well, we read, "Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell to the ground and worshiped. And he said, 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD'" (1:20-21). Job mourned, and he worshiped God. Satan couldn't have been more wrong. This is precisely the opposite of a man cursing God to his face. Satan had lost, but Satan doesn't take losing well, and so we're going to see a round two of this face off.

The next act in the narrative, then, takes place in chapter 2, and it's nearly an exact repeat of what we see in chapter 1. Again we have the heavenly scene with the hosts of heaven presenting themselves before the Lord. Again Satan is with them. Again the Lord asks Satan what he's doing, and Satan answers the same. Now, the Lord knows Satan had been relentlessly attacking Job and had been proven wrong, so maybe the Lord asks this simply to rub it in a bit. But the Lord opens the door for more. He again asks Satan if he's considered Job, adding, "He still holds fast his integrity, although you incited me against him to destroy him without reason" (2:3). But, as I noted, Satan doesn't take losing well, and so he'd proposes another attack on Job, but this time with higher stakes. He says, "Skin for skin! All that a man has he will give for his life. But strength out your hand and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face" (2:5-6). And again the Lord agrees, noting that Satan must spare Job's life, but otherwise Job is in the hands of the enemy. And again, Satan attempts to do his worst to Job.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 37.

We read in 2:7-8, “So Satan went from the presence of the LORD and struck Job with loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. And he took a piece of broken pottery with which to scrape himself while he sat in the ashes.” Now, already this sounds terrible as Job has these sores all over his body that he has to scrape with broken pottery. But as we read through the rest of the book it gets worse. When Job’s friends show up they don’t even recognize him he looks so bad. He’ll tell his friends later that his wounds seem infested with worms (maggots?), his skin is turning black and peeling, his wounds are breaking open and oozing, and he’s running a fever (7:5; 19:20; 30:30). It’s terrible bodily suffering. And after seeing this, even Job’s wife, encourages him to curse God and die. If there’s ever a moment when Satan probably was confident, surely this was the moment. Even his wife is encouraging him to curse God and just get this over with.

But, once again, Job responds by blessing the Lord, saying, “You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil” (2:10). And once more, Satan is defeated. He’s proven wrong. In fact, he won’t make an appearance again in the book. What more can he charge against Job before the face of God? He’s been beaten, and he disappears. But perhaps we would say that his influence is still seen with the arrival of Job’s friends, who show up at the end of chapter 2 and sit with Job for a week in silence before they begin speaking what will only add to Job’s misery in chapter 4.

That’s the story. What do we need to take note of from it? Let me make two observations. The first is that the Lord is in absolute control, even in our suffering.

### **The Lord is in absolute control, even in our suffering**

There are so many elements in these first two chapters that show us this is the case. First, you’ll note that Satan is absolutely limited by the Lord. Each time Satan has a conversation with the Lord, he is left in the position of having to ask God to act. That is, he never tells God what he’s going to do to Job. Nor does he even ask permission. He asks God to act. We see this in 1:11 as Satan says, “Stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.” And we see the same in 2:5 as Satan says to the Lord, “Stretch out your hand and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face.” Do you see? He’s not saying, “I’m going to touch all that he has. I’ll touch his bone and flesh.” He’s asking God to do it because he knows that God alone is sovereign over and in control of what happens to Job.

Similarly, though the text tells us that Satan goes out from the presence of the Lord and attacks Job (1:12; 2:7), he is only able to do this after the Lord gives him explicit permission to do so (1:12; 2:6), and even then he limits what Satan is allowed to do. So the Lord grants Satan permission but limits him from touching Job’s body, and in round two he grants Satan permission to afflict Job’s body but doesn’t allow him to take Job’s life. Again, the Lord is calling the shots here.

But it’s not just in this heavenly scene (which is hidden from Job) that we understand God’s absolute sovereignty over what is happening in Job’s life. We hear it from Job’s mouth as well.

Job understands God's absolute control over his suffering. Notice that he says in 1:21 about all that he's lost, "The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD." Then, similarly, in 2:10 he responds, "Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?" Do you see that in both cases Job sees these things as coming from the hand of the Lord? Job knows that God is the one who gives and takes away. God is the one who is the one from whom Job receives good and evil. And just in case we want to say, "Well, we're not sure that Job's words can be trusted here. After all, we're studying a book in which much of the speaking is actually not an accurate presentation of truth—as we'll see with the arrival of Job's friends," the narrator adds after each declaration from Job, "In add this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong" and "In all this Job did not sin with his lips" (1:22; 2:10). Job is saying nothing wrong about God here. His declarations can be trusted.

Moreover, the entire book makes no sense unless we understand that God is in control of the details of our lives—including our suffering. If this isn't the case, then Job's complaints against the Lord—which fill many of the chapters of this book—don't make sense. Why would Job complain to God if he doesn't think that God is sovereign over the events of his life? And if God isn't sovereign over the details that come to Job, then why doesn't God answer by saying, "It was the devil" or "I am not the one behind this"? But, as we'll see God does none of that. He agrees with Job that he's absolutely sovereign over his suffering. But before we get to fleshing out the implications from that, let me note one other observation: suffering in our lives has purposes we are unaware of.

### **Suffering in our lives has purposes we are unaware of**

One of the most interesting elements of Job 1-2 is that—as the reader—we get the full view of what's going on. As chapter 1 begins, while Job is out making burnt offerings and going about his day, we know that there's a heavenly conversation between Satan and God taking place that is going to result in Job having one of the most traumatic days any human could experience. And similarly, as Job is mourning the loss of his possessions and children at the end of chapter 1, we know that there's another heavenly conversation going on which will result in the greatest attack to Job's health and well-being he's ever known. But here's the thing: Job knows none of it. He's clueless about these details that the reader is aware of. Job doesn't get to tell himself in the midst of his suffering, "Well, I am going to make sure I bless God and refuse to curse him in this because I want the devil to see he's wrong." He has no idea what Satan has said about Job to the Lord. Nor does he get to comfort himself by saying, "Well, at least I know that the Lord has initiated this whole thing—even bringing up my name to Satan—because he says there is none like me on the earth. I get the blessing of showing how glorious God is." Job knows none of that. He's completely in the dark.

And as hard as it is, don't you think it'd make it a thousand times easier if Job had been privy to those heavenly conversations? Sure it would have. He would at least understand in a first-hand way why things were unfolding as they were. But he's unaware. He doesn't know God's purpose of basically using Job as an instrument of boasting and a person who will prove God's worth even before the devil himself. He doesn't know that he holds the place of honor in God's

heart as the one the Lord brings up in his conversation with the devil. After all, don't forget, God is the one who first mentions Job (twice!). What Job sees as God seemingly picking on him is actually the Lord honoring him before all the heavenly host. And yet, doesn't this help us to think through suffering in our own lives?

We, like Job, are not privy to God's purposes and plans in and through our suffering. We don't know what's in the mind of God or how he purposes to use us. We don't know if we're being used, like Job, to show off God's worth before principalities and powers. Yet there are some things we do know. We know that God is in control of our suffering. And we know that he is good. And we know that he loves us. And we know that he is working all things after the counsel of his will (as we read in Ephesians 1:11). Doesn't this lead us to the conclusion that every ounce of suffering he allows to come into our lives serves purposes that are good—and for our good—even if we are unaware how that fulfill God's purposes? We often sit in the darkness as well, like Job, and yet we have a blessing he didn't have. We get to read the book of Job so that we might be reminded that the one who is sovereign, even over our suffering, is working all for our good and for his glory in ways that we'll never know until we are with him. But now, even as we walk by faith, we have every reason to trust him in the midst of our suffering and—like Job—to worship him even while we suffer.

We'll obviously dive more into these ideas in the coming weeks, but I want to end this morning saying that if you're having a hard time trusting that the God who is in control really loves you and is working for your good, then remember that Job isn't the only righteous one in the Bible that suffers for a great purpose. Our Lord Jesus Christ suffered to the point of death while his friends abandoned him as well, and he wasn't just a man of integrity but the sinless God-man himself, laying down his life so that we might have forgiveness of sins and eternal life. So, if we wonder if we can trust our good and sovereign God in the midst of our suffering, we should just look at the cross and remember what he's done to make us his children. Let's do that now as we come to the table. Amen.