

## **When you suffer you never see the big picture**

### **Job 1.1-2.10**

Unfortunately, our series in Job is quite timely.

I say *unfortunately* because the issues we will be wrestling with as we work through this book with are not particularly pleasant, yet they are *timely* because every night on the TV, everytime we look at a website or hear a news bulletin on the radio, it seems that stories of mindless and needless suffering are front and center.

For example, do you remember Malaysia Airlines flight MH17?

Shot out of the air over Eastern Ukraine  
One thing I remember as the names of the victims came to light is that there were a lot of nice people on the flight.  
One man volunteered in his local school looking after handicapped children, Others had devoted their lives to important medical research and were, in fact, on their way to a medical conference on HIV/AIDS research. There were lots of decent people who suffered.

And so whenever we hear about events like that plane crash we hear people asking (and we might ask ourselves),  
*Why do innocent people suffer?*  
*Why are people making a positive contribution to society taken away?*

And this is *exactly the question* that is asked in the book of Job.

*Why do the innocent suffer?*  
So the topic of our series is unpleasant but it's always relevant.

There is also a secondary question

which we'll keep an eye on over the next 7 weeks, which is this:  
*When suffering comes to our own door, what does a good response look like?*  
No-one is immune to hardship, and so when the inevitable difficulties come we'll to decide how to respond  
As we'll see, our response matters.  
There are faithful ways to respond but also sinful ways, and so we need to be mindful of which response we'll adopt; reading through Job's experience will help us prepare for that moment.

So let's meet our main character.

The book of Job is a story told mainly in Hebrew poetry, with the various characters giving long speeches, And like any story the opening chapter introduces us to the main characters. Job is introduced to us in vs 1-5 where two details stand out: On one hand Job is *pious*, and on the other he is *prosperous*.

These two characteristics are important  
because it's the relationship between the two  
that will be discussed at length as the book continues.

We see Job's piety right from the outset, verse 2

This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil.

And Job's godliness, (which is what I mean when I say he was *pious*,  
I'm talking about his desire to please God, to pray to God),  
this is seen in his concern for his adult children's spiritual wellbeing.

Verse 5 When a period of feasting had run its course, Job would make arrangements for them to be purified. Early in the morning he would sacrifice a burnt offering for each of them, thinking, "Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts." This was Job's regular custom.

He reminds me of many parents I have come across in the church,  
men and women who *pray for their children*.

If you have been blessed with parents like that  
then that is cause for thanksgiving.

And it's also a way to bless the young people  
that *you* might have in *your* life;  
to be praying for their spiritual welfare.

And Job piety is also shown in his trust that

*through a sacrifice*, God can purify us from sin.

In this way Job is very similar to Christians today:

he realizes that sin is a problem,

but he also knows that a sacrifice can purify sinners from their wrongdoing.

The difference, of course, is that the sacrifice we trust in  
is not a burnt offering but the sacrifice of Christ on his cross,  
but the shape of Job's faith is very similar.

Not only is Job pious, but he's also *prosperous*.

From verse 2 we read that Job had seven sons and three daughters, <sup>3</sup>and he owned seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred donkeys, and had a large number of servants. He was the greatest man among all the people of the East.

Job is a man of great material wealth, but he's also *relationally wealthy*

Verse 4 His sons used to hold feasts in their homes on their birthdays,  
and they would invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them.

It's a picture-perfect family that we're being introduced to here;  
they've got money, and they all get along.

And isn't this exactly what Job deserves?

Isn't this the right and proper result of doing the right thing all your life?

Isn't God simply rewarding Job for all his prayerful obedience?

I think this is the formula that many people might wish for,  
But it seldom happens that way, and in the next scene we can see why.

I want you to imagine that this opening chapter is being told on film.

Scene 1 ends with pious but slightly anxious Job watching the sacrificial fire,  
And then the camera slowly pans up,  
following the smoke into the heavens  
where we see the next set of characters in this drama.

From verse 6 we are in the throne room of God.

where all the heavenly host have been summoned to report on their activity.  
It's a bit of a surprise to see Satan here isn't it?  
But what does it tell us?  
It tells us that even Satan is accountable to God,  
and that as powerful as Satan is there is still one who is even greater.

And this God who is greater, he takes great pride in his devout servants.

He sounds like a bragging Father in verse 8, doesn't he?

"Satan, have you seen my servant Job? Oh there is no one on earth like him!  
He is blameless and upright; there's a man who fears God and shuns evil."  
God's overflowing joy and pride for Job teaches us an important lesson.  
Even when everything falls apart (which it soon will for Job),  
it's not falling apart because God has stopped loving us.  
God shows great *love* and *joy* and *concern* for Job  
even as he takes what Job has away.

In this case,  
the terrible things that will soon happen don't happen out of God's anger.

So why do they happen?

Well, Satan responds in vs 9-11

<sup>9</sup>"Does Job fear God for nothing?" Satan replied. <sup>10</sup>"Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. <sup>11</sup>But now stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face."

We humans like to think that piety can lead to a blessing,

But Satan's hunch is that things are actually running in the opposite direction:  
that it's Job's God-given prosperity that has led to his piety.

*Yeah Job's godly but that only because you given him every reason to be  
So strip him of all his blessings, then we'll see just how pious he is.*

It's a challenging accusation that Satan has for us here, isn't it?

Are we only faithful when God gives us a material reason?  
What would happen if our earthly pleasures were taken away?  
What would happen if our goals and desires in life were placed out of reach?  
Would God still find us to be his loyal and devoted servants?  
or are we simply his fair-weather friends?

There's a line in a song we sing here at church *In Christ the solid rock I stand,  
When every earthly prop gives way,*

*He then is all my Hope and Stay.*

[There's a line in a song we sing here at church *Cornerstone*,  
In every high and stormy gale  
My anchor holds within the veil]  
I'd like that to be true ... But Satan thinks that it might be a weak spot.  
He thinks that when Job's blessings are removed,  
instead of maintaining faith he can move Job to *curse God to his face*.  
This is Satan's aim:  
to force God and humanity apart using whatever means he has at his disposal

And the Bible tells us  
that Job is not the only one to have experienced Satan in this way.  
In Luke 21.31, Jesus says something remarkable with regard to the disciples  
"Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat.  
Now the story of Job sheds some light on that verse doesn't it?  
The scene in Job was repeated some other time with Peter as the object.  
Satan wants to test as many people as he can, and, presumably,  
he's asking God the same question about us.

After God gives permission for Satan to test Job,  
the camera descends out of the heavenly throne room  
and lands again on Job and his family.

The disaster comes in four waves.  
First of all a marauding troop of Sabeans attack his oxen and donkeys,  
Then secondly the fire of God falls from the sky  
consuming his sheep and their attendants.  
Then come three bands of Chaldeans who take off with Job's camels,  
And finally a natural disaster occurs  
where a great wind collapses the house where Job's family is feasting,  
and they perish.

If you were Job's neighbor and you saw what had just happened,  
what would you conclude?  
You could say that Job was simply an unlucky victim of earthy forces:  
A victim of evil neighbors and warring tribes,  
A victim of violent weather.  
Although there is the strange case of the 'fire of God':  
that's how the reporting servant understood the mysterious phenomenon  
that took out the sheep.  
Maybe we might be moved to say that some suffering  
is the result of mysterious forces that we don't understand.

But what extra information has the story given us as readers?  
We've been given the privilege of that extra scene

where the camera has panned up and revealed to us  
some extra facts that Job and his household cannot see.  
We know that Satan is actually the one who has orchestrated all this.

So here is the big lesson that I think we can learn from these opening scenes:  
*When we suffer, the causes for that suffering are often hidden.*  
We see the outcome of suffering, but we don't always see the cause.  
There's a whole bunch of stuff that could be going on in the spiritual sphere,  
but we might not necessarily see it.

From time to time the Bible gives us hints as to why suffering *might* be happening,  
There are all sorts of reasons why suffering *might* be happening  
and one of the reasons *could be* that Satan is testing us.  
But even if he is testing us,  
that's a fact which is hidden from our view.

Something else we can deduce from this passage is that  
the cause of suffering is not only veiled, but it's also *complex*.  
When the camera pans up into the heavens  
we see a complex array of players and causes which are in operation.  
You'll note that while Satan is testing Job,  
God himself speaks as if he too is responsible for Job's suffering,  
In Chapter 2.3 God says to Satan you incited me against him to ruin him.

If we were to ask the question, *Who is responsible for Job's suffering?*  
the answer is *lots of people*:  
Satan is responsible, the Chaldeans and Sabeans are responsible,  
and also God himself.

But it's vital to notice that the parties who are responsible act with *different* motives,  
Satan has an evil motive, he wants to rip Job away from God,  
But God's motives cannot be evil, because there is nothing evil in God.

I have to admit, I find it really hard to understand how God can bring about disaster  
while at the same time being holy and loving in his actions.  
This is the part of the Christian faith I struggle with the most.  
How can a loving God act in this way? It's a real test for me.

But I think a key piece of the puzzle is to realize that whatever purpose God has,  
it's a purpose which is hidden.  
One day we will have access into that throne room for ourselves,  
and when we finally see and understand what exactly was going on.  
We'll see and understand perfectly what God was up to all along.  
*Ah ha, we'll say, so that's what you were doing!!!???*

So when disaster strikes,

the response that's required from us has a number of elements to it.

There's a need for patience,

Patience not only to endure the suffering itself  
but also patience to wait for the final answer.

And as we're waiting, a good response will try not to jump to conclusions,  
especially the conclusion that God is somehow doing the wrong thing by us.

Ch1.22 In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.

Because we don't know the whole story,  
we ought not to blame God for doing the wrong thing.  
He just might have a good reason for doing what he has done.  
This is the wisdom that Job demonstrates at this point.  
When you don't have full knowledge of the facts,  
it's a wise thing to withhold judgment.  
In fact, it's a sin to be blaming God for doing the wrong thing by you.

And if listen to the rest of Jesus words in Luke 21,

we'll hear another important element of our response.

After revealing to Peter that Satan had asked permission to test the disciples,  
Jesus adds this assurance:

But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail.

And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."

Remember that risen Christ prays for us as he prayed for Simon Peter;

*That* ought to encourage us as we persevere in faith.

And note also the encouragement for the disciples to strengthen each other.

Prayer and fellowship: indispensable keys to maintaining faithfulness.

And as Christ prays for us, as we pray and encourage each other,

The result were looking for is the response we see in Job himself.

Imagine being able to respond with Job's words

The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away

may the name of the LORD be praised

It's kind of like Christ's Garden moment, isn't it? Not my will but yours.

I heard a recent example of this kind of perseverance just this week.

You may be following the story of Ahok, the former governor of Jakarta in Indonesia. He was defeated in the election held on Wednesday, and his defeat has come after a sustained period of attack over his Christian faith, including what sounds like unfounded charges of blasphemy against the Koran. His suffering has been very real, and could get a lot worse. But what did he say in his concession speech after the election? "God gave me this role, and now he has taken it away." A Job-like response; submitting himself totally to the will of God, acknowledging God's hand in the events even though human forces are quite clearly at work. I hope and pray that he maintains his faith as I hope we do too. Will Job maintain his faith? It's a long book. We'll see. [Pray]