

Job: When the Storm Breaks

Job 1:1-22

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During the years 1643-1666 (almost 24 years) Joseph Caryl, a Congregationalist minister who was present at The Westminster Assembly, preached some 250 lectures on Job! In the final lecture he apologizes, saying: "I have not attained so clear an understanding of some passages..." That may be your verdict on Job, too. You have read it, but *what does it mean?*

There is perhaps no greater, and certainly no more moving story in all the Bible than the one that unfolds here: the story of Job and his trial. Everyone can relate to some degree with this story.

Everyone knows: Job was a "patient" man. James 5:11 tells us so. Then we start to read Job and we sense that Job was NOT patient. He grew increasingly *impatient*. But James does not mean passivity and inactivity, but perseverance, stickability, and keeping going when all the lights go out.

There is a marker in the opening verse that helps us understand what kind of book this is. We read that Job "feared God" (1:1) Later, in Job 28:28 we learn that to fear God is an act of wisdom. The Book of Job is about wisdom; it is, along with Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, part of the Wisdom Literature of the Bible. But what does that mean? It means more than knowledge (facts and figures); wisdom books show us how to live as God intends us to live. Job, then, is a "practical" book. It deals with life-issues and tells us how best to respond to them.

Everyone identifies with this book. It asks the great questions: Why?, Why me?, Why now? Why in this way? The "Why do bad things happen to good people?" question. You have asked this question, I'm sure.

When life turns bitter, where is God? When dreams are shattered, why does God not intervene? When nightmares become reality, why does God not say something?

It's hard sometimes not to think that God is a "cosmic sadist," as C. S. Lewis did in *A Grief Observed*. And yet, everything within us as Christians tells us that it is

wrong to think like that. But, we do secretly think it.

The first chapter brings into sharp focus three characters: Job, Satan and God. Job is introduced as coming from Uz (somewhere in the Arabian desert, perhaps). He is not an Israelite, but a representative of humanity. He has no lineage. His anonymity is meant to help us identify with him.

It is important to realize that the prologue is written for *our* benefit! Job himself had not read it. He was unaware of the cosmic drama that unfolds in these lines.

A two-fold testimony as to the character of Job is given, one by the author (1:1f), and another by God himself (1:8). God tells us that Job was a godly man. We need to remember that. Four words describe his godliness: *blameless* (wholehearted would be a better translation), *upright*, *feared* God and *shunned evil*.

Job had a healthy respect for God. Not to fear God is a sickness of the soul. The fear of God is "the soul of godliness," wrote John Murray. It is an apprehension of God in majesty held before our eyes as we live our lives each day. Job had a great God and he knew it! When we fear God, as a rendition of Psalm 34 puts it, "we will have nothing else to fear"!

As Calvin says on this chapter: "there is nothing better than to be subject to the majesty of God."

Job was godly and it showed. He was a man of spiritual and moral integrity. He bore the distinguishing marks of true religion. God calls Job, "my servant Job..." (1:8).

All of this provides for us corroboration to Job's plea of "innocence." Later on in the book, his friends will accuse him of all kinds of sins and indiscretions; but we know that whatever the reason for Job's suffering, it is not *directly* connected to any sin of his.

Later on in the Old Testament, Job is mentioned alongside Daniel and Noah as widely known men of God (Ezekiel 14:14, 20). It is all the more shocking, then, that this man, of all people, should suffer in the way that he does.

We all know that behind every evil lies the figure of Satan. We know this, but we are often prone to forget it, too. That's why the Bible keeps reminding us that from the beginning, when sin entered the world and pain and sickness along with it, the devil was there. He had something to do it.

It is still surprising, though, that Satan does not loom large in Old Testament. Apart from here in the opening chapters, the only other chapters that mention his work in any detail are Genesis 3 and Zechariah 3.

The word 'Satan' means, "to bear a grudge (against), to oppose." Here, it is used with the definite article, "*the* SATAN." It a title as much as it is a name. He is *the Adversary*.

One of the first things that puzzles us about this story is the fact that Satan is in the presence of God!

Several truths emerge that will help understand what is being said here.

First, in response to the question, "Where is this taking place?", that is, where exactly is Satan presenting himself before God (1:6). We will have to say, "I do not know." That may not be very satisfactory, but we know that this is not heaven. Satan cannot come into heaven. No sin or evil can step across the threshold of that holy place. But Satan is *somewhere*. And what is far more important is the question, "*Why* is there?"

Satan, along with the "angels" (Hebrew reads "sons of God") came to "present themselves before the Lord" (1:6). Satan has to give an account of himself! (1:7). He does not have ultimate authority. He is "reporting" to God. He is not autonomous. His power is a delegated one. That should tell us immediately that his power is curtailed. He cannot do as he pleases. His malice is under check. It may not appear like that to us, but whatever wickedness he can design, it is always less than he might desire.

The answer Satan gives betrays something about him: he is a vagrant, a vagabond. He roams through the earth and goes back and forth in it (1:7). He spends his time wandering to and fro. He can never say, "This is my home."

Philosophically, this tells that ultimate reality is not dualistic. Satan's power is not on a par with God's. There is no equality between good and evil. Calvin says in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*: "God holds the key." (I.xviii.1).

Trials come as a result of Satan's malice. Job was unaware of that, of course. He never gives Satan a mention. That is one of Satan's tricks. He is quite content that we never give him a moment's thought! Then he can get on with his work without hindrance. We can, to cite Lewis, make too little of Satan.

But, trials cannot simply be attributed to Satan. They can be attributed to him, but not solely to him. It is God who brings up the possibility of Job's temptation to Satan (1:8; 1:12; 2:3). This is so very important to understand. The ultimate authority for this trial is God's, not Satan's. When bad things happen to God's people, *God did it!* That is the disturbing message. We get the impression that Satan hadn't even thought about Job until God mentioned him.

Satan is a cynic. He always misreads and twists everything. He lies because he

is "the father of lies." "Does Job fear God for nothing?" (1:9) he says. In effect, the only reason why Job doesn't curse You is because of the things You have given to him, he suggests. Take these away and Job will curse You to Your face. That gives us a clue as what Satan is about. His ambition is to curse God. He will do it himself, and he will attempt to get others to join him. That's what he lives for. It is hard to imagine a being so utterly given over to evil as to make this the goal of everything one does.

But the eternal frustration that Satan has to live with is that he can never accomplish what he desires. He is limited in his abilities. He is not omnipotent. He is a finite creature. God sets boundaries around what he can and cannot do (1:11; cf. 2:6). Job can be tested domestically and circumstantially but he himself must remain unscathed. There are "rules of engagement." Satan can only stand and wait. At the close of the Bible we see it again: in Revelation 20, Satan is "released" but only to fulfill God's plan and his defeat is certain. Lewis again: we can make too much of the Devil.

The disturbing thing for some of us is the realization that behind what happens here Job's loss of his family and goods lies the hand of God. That's the problem, isn't it. It isn't so much that Job suffered. We are used to that. We see examples of that every day. And, it isn't the so-called "problem of evil" either solving the issue as where did sin come from.

No, the problem here is God!

Stating it like that is shocking, isn't it? How can God be a "problem"? But the issue we have to face in this and the subsequent chapter of Job is how can God allow this to happen? No, it is stronger than that. It is not, as Calvin observes so often in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, a matter of God "allowing" as though God was somehow passive in all of this. God actually instigates the trial. He puts the idea in Satan's head. He it is who sets the rules. This is God's doing. *That*, is the problem.

Stating it that way reminds us again that the Book of Job is primarily a book about God. It is the issue we shall have to return to again and again as we unfold its message. It is not so much, why do we suffer? But, why does God make us suffer? When we come full circle to the end of the Book, we shall observe that Job is given a revelation of the majesty of God rather than an answer to his many and pointed questions. "There is nothing better," observed Calvin, "than to be subject to the majesty of God." But more of that later. For now we need to look at Job's initial response to his trial. And it is breathtaking!

His response is to "worship" (1:20). It is always appropriate to worship. Job seems utterly submissive and servant-like. It is the epitome of trust. The beautiful words of verse 21 are stunning:

Naked I came from my mother's womb,
And naked I will depart.
The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away;
May the name of the LORD be praised. (1:21)

All of us who love God desire to respond to trials like this. It could be a prayer that we make each day: "Lord, when difficulty comes, no matter what it may be, help me to say what Job said."

These words recognize...
that this world is not our home; that God's purpose transcends this life. These words that everything we have comes from God.
that we are stewards.
that we must never attribute to God anything that is evil.

But wait a minute! Have we not already seen that God is the one who instigates this trial? Indeed we have, though Job did not know that. Nevertheless here is a mystery:

God foreordains everything that comes to pass.
Trials and sin come to pass.
But God is not the author of sin.
God does not tempt us to sin.
God does not condone sin.

"God from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin..." (Westminster Confession of Faith III.i).

Sometimes all we can do is state the principle; logic evades us.

James Robertson's biography of Stonewall Jackson contains a beautiful and moving account of the time when, at 30 years of age, Jackson lost his wife, Ellie, and baby son: On Sunday afternoon, October 22, 1854. Ellie went into labor. The child was stillborn. About an hour later she began to hemorrhage and died very quickly. Jackson is writing to his sister, Laura:

I have been called to pass through the deep waters of affliction, but all has been satisfied," he write. "the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away, blessed be the name of the Lord. It is his will that my dear wife and child should no longer abide with me, and as it is His holy will, I am perfectly reconciled to the sad bereavement, though I deeply mourn my loss. My Dearest Ellie breathed her last on Sunday evening, the same day on which the child was born dead. Oh! The consolations of religion! I can willingly submit to anything is God strengthens me. Oh! My Sister would that you could have Him for your God! Though all nature to me is eclipsed,

yet I have joy in knowing that God withholds no good things from them that love and keep his commandments. And he will overrule this *Sad, Sad* bereavement for good.

A few weeks later he writes again:

"She has now gone on a glorious visit through a gloomy portal. I look forward with delight to the day when I shall join *her*. Religion is all that I desire it to be. I am reconciled to my loss and have joy in hope of a future reunion when the wicked cease from trembling and the weary are at rest."

Job would have said the same.

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