

# The Book of Job and Suffering: A Sermon

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## INTRODUCTION

The Apostle Peter tells us, “that the testing (or proof) of your faith, more precious than gold which is perishable, though tested by fire, may be found to the praise and glory and honor in the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 1:7). God tests the faith of his saints. Such testing, when successful, strengthens our faith by working patience in us. And when patience to rely upon God and upon Him alone has its perfect work, we become complete and whole, lacking in nothing (James 1:3-4). Such testing, while difficult, is always profitable. God tested Abraham, for example, in commanding him to sacrifice Isaac, the son of promise (Gen 22:1). Abraham relied upon God, stating to Isaac that, “God will provide for Himself the lamb for

the burnt offering, my son” (Gen 22:8). Indeed, Abraham believed that God would raise Isaac from the dead if necessary (Heb 11:19). Such testing rendered Abraham’s great faith in God even stronger. The same may be said of Joseph as

well. The word of God—that his family would bow down to him—tested him as he lived a slave and prisoner for some twenty years (Ps 105:19). Joseph learned to wait patiently on God.

The book of Job teaches the same lesson that God tests his people that they may learn to rely upon Him, and Him alone for all things. In fact, God designed this book as a pattern to aid us for the testing and strengthening of our faith. Trials and testing will come our way: loss of health, loss of family and friends, and even death itself. But the question is clear—will we live by faith as Job did or will we live by sight like many of the children of Israel did in the wilderness as well as the way the world daily lives? Job shows us how to live by faith.

## **JOB: HIS PIETY AND PROSPERITY (JOB 1:1-5)**

The book introduces Job by his godliness, not by his nationality. Four attributes characterize Job’s piety. The first is “blameless.” Used of animals without blemishes for sacrifice, blameless describes Job’s character as without essential

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defect, a man of integrity. The second is “upright.” Denoting that which is straight, not twisted or perverted, upright relates Job’s character as conformed to God’s spiritual and moral standards. The third attribute is “a man who fears God.” The fear of God is an understanding of God that affects our thoughts, feelings, and conduct and seeks God’s approval, a profound reverence of His majesty and a dread of His judgments. The “fear of the Lord” is the Biblical designation for a godly, religious man. The fourth attribute is “a man who turns away from evil.” He stayed away from all that was wrong in thought, speech, and behavior. He did not attempt to get as close to sin as possible without sinning. On the contrary, he kept sin far away. In addition to these four attributes, Job nurtured the spiritual welfare of his children by participating in religious services, offering sacrifices on their behalf. Finally, Job’s godliness was not a moderate or nominal piety. Even God testified that Job was the godliest man of his generation (Job 1:8).

In every way, godliness benefits Job as his example indicates, especially in the OT context and given his place in redemptive-history. First, his godliness secured the family structure, the foundation of countless blessings. Furthermore, his godliness attracted many friends. And most prominently in the first chapter, his godliness brought wealth. Individuals and societies that follow God’s word in suppressing sin and in promoting godliness become prosperous, while individuals and societies that suppress godliness and promote sin inevitably become impoverished. Godliness subdues sin allowing for genuine liberty and prosperity, not libertarian licentiousness leading to the slavery and degradation of sin. Ungodliness debases individuals and societies fostering atheism in all its forms, particularly secularism, socialism, and communism. These have always left human misery in their wake. Job’s example and all history demonstrate that godliness brings life and God’s blessings and that ungodliness brings death and God’s curse in this life and in the life to come.

## **1. JOB: HIS TRIALS**

In Job 1:6, God asks Satan,<sup>1</sup> “Have you considered my servant, Job”? Satan, after cynically insinuating that Job’s godliness exists solely because of his prosperity, admits that he never considered Job because God had built a hedge about him. Now God tests Job by taking away the hedge, allowing Satan to try Job in a variety of incredibly difficult ways. But God, always sovereign over all, limits Satan’s authority. He can destroy his prosperity and family, but he cannot touch Job personally.

### **LOSS OF PROSPERITY AND FAMILY**

Satan is anything but inept at his work. He does not attack Job in stages allowing Job time to recover after each attack. Instantaneously, Satan destroyed all that Job and his wife possessed. Their pain was excruciating; their loss, unimaginable.

Yet, Job responds with one of the greatest statements of faith in all Scripture: “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I shall return. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord” (1:21.) Job was not a fatalist, stoic, or tough guy who could take a punch. Although his pain is apparent by the tearing of his garments and by the emotion of his statements, Job did not charge God recklessly. Instead, Job recognizes that God gave him everything and that He was the source of all his blessing. He came into this world with nothing, and he would leave this world with nothing. Anything acquired during his life was by God’s blessing alone. Certainly, he was in great agony. He acknowledged God’s goodness even in tragedy. Job’s thankfulness characterized his trust and reliance upon the Lord.

### **LOSS OF HEALTH**

Job, and apparently his wife, admirably overcame the first trial by relying upon the goodness of God, but now the second trial comes: the loss of health. “Skin or skin,” says the accuser of the brethren, “Yes, all that a man has he will give for his life” (2:4). God allows Satan to take away Job’s health, but again with limits—Satan cannot kill

him. This limit, of course, is unknown to Job or to those around him; only we as the readers know what is going on. Both he and they believe that his death was near. And now even Job's wife, who apparently exercised remarkable faith in the first trial, suffers a setback. As she watches the persistent suffering of her husband scraping himself with a piece of broken pottery time and time again with great intensity to seek relief from the boils, she advises him, in a momentary lapse of faith, to abandon God and to end it all (2:9). Job's gentle rebuke indicates that she was not speaking like herself. He responds with another gem of faith, "Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?" (2:10). Job's faith was not a fair-weathered faith. He relied on God in good times and in bad times. His was a faith that endures to the end. Job again did not sin with his lips. Finally, his friends come with the best of intentions to comfort and support Job in his time of need. Unfortunately for Job, Satan will use them as his last tool to increase Job's misery and to drive Job away from his God.

## 2. JOB: HIS PROBLEM

Persistent suffering affects our mind and body. Though in great pain and believing death imminent, Job vacillates between faith and doubt in the Lord. Having observed persistent suffering at hospital visitations, I have seen this wavering of the mind between faith and doubt. One moment, the afflicted express great faith, the next moment, great doubt. Such suffering changes the emotional state, which in turn, affects the personality. The Job of chapter three seems a different person from the Job of the first two chapters, but not completely so. His great faith returns from time to time, but now Job, his body wasting away and his mind racked by pain and loss, expresses doubt and confusion. And most disturbing, Job, and his friends, all believe that calamities and tragedies were judgments of God because of sin, and that prosperity and blessing were one-for-one rewards because of a person's righteousness. Though hav-

ing many problems, for Job this is the problem.

Knowing his own innocence, Job is tormented with the problem of his suffering. Job, to be sure, denies his own perfection (13:26), but he also knows that he has not sinned to deserve this misery. To make matter worse, Job's friends, who come to comfort him, accuse and condemn him as a sinner. At first, Eliphaz appeals to Job's own example of admonishing and strengthening the weak (4:3-5). Having reminded Job of his fear of God and of his integrity (4:6), he gets to the point: you reap what you sow. "Whoever perished being innocent," states Eliphaz (4:7), "or where were the upright destroyed?" Eliphaz references the universal sinfulness of man, "Can man be pure before his Maker"? (4:17) Why God even charges his angels with error, he then presses home his point, "How much more those who dwell in houses of clay" (4:17-19). Eliphaz now reminds Job that "affliction does not come from the dust" (5:6). In short, your affliction is not happenstance; it comes from sin! Finally, Eliphaz calls on Job to repent, "But as for me, I would seek God." He assures Job that if he repented, God would bring relief and redeem him from all his troubles, so that even nature would be at peace with him, "For your covenant will be with the stones of the field" (5:8-23).

But Job cannot deny his conscience. He knows that he has not done what his friends and others think about him and think he has done before God. This burdens Job with yet another trial—the trial of false accusation and judgment. Job realizes his sinfulness, he even recognizes the rashness of his words (6:3), but he cannot understand what God is doing and why He is doing it to him. As the positions harden between Job and his friends, and as his friends continue to insist that God's ways against sinners are easily verifiable, Job words become more rash. In weak moments, he questions the providence of God. It seems that God destroys the wicked and the righteous (9:22). Indeed, the wicked at times do prosper (21:7-34). And though God knows of Job's innocence, God's hand is still heavy on Job (10:7). Job feels as if God has wronged him (19:6).

Job's words are only more evidence of guilt to his friends. "Your own iniquity teaches your mouth," declares Eliphaz, "and you choose the tongue of the crafty. Your own mouth declares you guilty, and not I. Your own lips answer against you" (15:5-6). As Job spoke in his weakened condition, his friends showed no compassion or understanding to their suffering friend (6:14). They continue to press for his confession and repentance. The frustration and anger between Job and his friends increases. But Job will not relent.

The anger reaches a climax as the friends take their argument to its logical conclusion. If Job is suffering for his sin, and if he is suffering like no other man, then his sin or sins must be most heinous. And if Job still refuses to confess, his friends will inform him of his sins. Based solely on his own deductions from Job's sufferings, Eliphaz catalogues Job's endless sins: a taker of pledges from the poor, a withholder of food and water from the dying, an oppressor of the widow and orphan (22:5-11). He drinks up iniquity like water (15:16). This is libel. When the young man Elihu speaks later, he piles on more accusations of Job walking in the company of the wicked and of Job drinking up mockery (of God) like water (34:7-8). Job is insulted and hurt (19:2-3). His friends have brought only further trial and torment. Job returns the insults, calling them sorry comforters (16:2). He sarcastically claims that wisdom will die when they die (12:2). The situation has become personal. He compares their comfort to a wadi whose waters are gone in a moment, disappointing those who hope for waters (6:15). Neither side will yield. Job's problem remains.

### 3. JOB: HIS FAITH

But Job's faith also remains. Like a ship beaten and tossed about in the storm, Job's faith is holding against all odds and against all adversaries: the flesh, the Devil, the world, and his friends. God, having begun a good work in Job, will bring it to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. Though many have forsaken God because of their troubles,

Job's faith is saving faith, the faith that overcomes all—including problems our minds cannot solve. Job takes consolation that he has not denied the word of the Holy One and that he has not forsaken the fear of the Almighty (6:10, 14). Job's faith in God will remain though he loses his life, "Though He slay me, I will hope in Him" (13:15). Job knows that there is only One who can testify to his integrity, "Behold, my witness is in heaven, and my advocate is on high" (16:19). Job also knows that he has walked in God's ways, and he knows that when testing is over, whether in this life or in the next life, he will come forth as gold (23:10). Though his faith waxes and wanes and though his problem remains, his faith is the victory.

Job achieves this victory of faith in chapter 19, his lowest point. All sources of comfort and support are gone for him. His wife loathes his breath. His brothers are removed from him. His old servants treat him as a stranger. The children in the streets despise him. His friends have abandoned him (19:13-19). He even feels abandoned by God. "He breaks me down on every side," complains Job, "and I am gone, and He has uprooted my hope like a tree" (19:10). He appears hopeless. But Job, who against hope believed in hope, turns to his God. As if his mind switches again from doubt to faith, Job now expresses another great statement of faith. "As for me," declares Job, "I know that my Redeemer lives" (19:25). But this is no ordinary relative who can "buy back" Job from some financial or personal difficulty. On the contrary, "And at the end He will take His stand on the earth," exclaims Job, "Even after my skin is destroyed, yet from my flesh I shall see God, whom I myself shall behold" (19:25-27). Job recognizes that God may not vindicate him in this life, but God will vindicate him yet. Even if it comes at the resurrection, his own eye will see his Redeemer, his Vindicator. Job has faith, not an inane, vague notion of positive thinking—a faith in faith. Like all saving faith, Job's faith has an object upon which it relies. Job's faith, trust, and reliance focuses *upon God*, his Redeemer (and, of course, the only Redeemer of the Lord's people is the Lord

Jesus Christ). He believes, against all odds, that whether in this life or in the life to come, His divine Redeemer lives and that He will vindicate him. This is the victory that overcomes the world.

#### 4. JOB: HIS GOD

After Elihu speaks of the storm coming in the distance, God appears in that storm. Speaking out of the whirlwind, God begins to interrogate Job. Job wanted his day in court, and now he is getting it with God beginning the questioning. Does Job, asks God, understand any of My ways in creation? Well, if not that subject, how about nature in general? And if not that, pick your topic—the seas, light or darkness, the rain cycle, constellations, the animal kingdom, or anything else? God concludes, “Will the faultfinder contend with the Almighty? Let him who reproves God answer it.” Although Job now has his chance he wanted, he has no questions and no answers. “Behold,” says Job, “I am insignificant; what can I reply to you?” (40:2-4) Now Job, who was previously self-confident in his complaint and arguments against God’s treatment of him, abandons his self-dependence. Job now completely trusts in God and God alone. But God is not finished working in Job’s heart, He resumes the questioning, asking about the Behemoth and Leviathan, awe-inspiring creatures. Job again remains silence. This time, however, he repents in dust and ashes.

But why repent? If we were questioned about nature and missed the answer, we would not repent. This is something far greater than a history lesson. God is revealing His infinite perfections and character to Job, in particular, His infinite wisdom and power. As God, or more precisely as Christ, appears to Job in the whirlwind and talks to Job, Job perceives the divine perfections. Job sees God, not with the physical eye (the invisible God is in the whirlwind), but with the eye of the soul or with the eye of faith. “I have heard of you,” now asserts Job, “by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you” (42:5). It is as if formerly Job merely *knew of or about* God, but now he *knows* him. Certainly, Job had known God formerly, but

his recent experience—both in his suffering and in his seeing God—led Job into a far greater knowledge of and relationship with God that seemed to make the former experience a mere hearing about Him. It is the difference between hearing about someone and having a close personal relationship with someone, the difference between knowing something merely with the head and knowing something with the heart. It is theoretical knowledge versus experiential knowledge.

Repentance was inevitable. He now understood that God is perfect in all His ways. His wisdom is infinitely perfect; therefore, His plan for Job (and for us) is infinitely perfect. Job’s understanding of God and his faith in God, though excellent in so many ways, was too small, too limited. Since his mind could not understand God’s ways from beginning to end, Job’s faith faltered. But now Job *knew* God. And although he still could not comprehend God’s ways with him, he could trust Him and His infinite wisdom in spite of his own finite understanding and knowledge. Job now wondered how he could have thought about God as he did. “Therefore,” says Job, “I have declared that which I did not understand. Things too wonderful for me, which I did not know” (42:3).

Now God’s work was complete in the great man of faith. God had refined and increased Job’s faith, though he was the most faithful man of his day. God had expanded Job’s knowledge of Himself, their personal relationship was now far deeper, though he was closer to God than any man of his day. And finally, God made Job an example for all who come after him, though he was already God’s example in his own day. We will never arrive at perfection in this life. If Job, as the most godly man, could advance in faith by relying upon the Lord alone, so can we. Job lived by faith and not by sight. He relied upon God—not his friends, not his family, not his relatives, and especially, not himself. So must we if we are to live like Christians and not like the world.

If we are to advance in faith, we need the same vision of God that Job experienced. While God

probably will never speak to us out of a whirlwind, we have a more sure word: the Bible. As read and mediated upon with the blessing of the Holy Spirit, the Bible increases our faith to rely upon God. From His word, we need to see Him and His infinite perfections, so that when the difficult day comes—and it will—we might follow in the steps of that great trailblazer of the faith: Job.

## CONCLUSION

The Apostle James tells us, “Consider it all joy, my brothers, when you fall into various trials” (James 1:2). We do not usually think this way. We usually attempt to avoid trials at all costs. But those who live by faith understand that such trials provide the opportunity to rely upon God and to exercise and strengthen their faith. Such trials can bring certainty to our faith in God as He answers our prayers, as He guides us in life, and as He sup-

plies our needs and requests to Him. Indeed, as we live by faith, God becomes the *Living* God by demonstrating His presence in our lives. May we look to the perfect One, whose word is life, whose way is sure and just, and whose redemption in Jesus Christ is our only hope.

## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup>Some modern interpreters of the book of Job deny that the Satan of Job is the Satan of the New Testament. The Satan of Job, however, demonstrates the same character of the Satan of the New Testament: a liar and slanderer, a tempter of the godly, the destroyer, and the great adversary of the saints. Moreover, Peter’s allusion (1 Pet 5:8) to the book of Job (Job 1:7) when referring to Satan, “Your adversary, the Devil, as a roaring lion *walks about seeking* someone to *devour*,” settles the issue. This Satan is best viewed as the Satan of the New Testament.