

## **The God of Suffering**

Job 1:1–2:10

As most of you know, we were both surprised and excited to discover we were pregnant with our fifth child last winter. And as most of you know, we were devastated to lose that child before we ever had a chance to meet her. We lost Ruby Kate after 18 weeks of pregnancy.

When our family was here in town last week, most of the time was taken up in sightseeing and bantering and playing games and eating (a lot of eating). But on Thursday we took a special moment to visit Ruby's grave, and see her headstone for the first time. A when we got back, Carissa's sister Kelsey gave us perhaps the most precious housewarming gift we've ever received. This is a family portrait of sorts. The birds in the trees represent Carissa and me, with Joshua, Moriah, Eva, and Chloe. The three birds flying away are the ones we lost to heaven—Ruby, and two other babies between Joshua and Moriah.



I share our story of loss not because it's unique, but precisely because it is *not*. Our story is just one of million similar stories of loss, grief, and the sorrow so common to this fallen world. The loss of a job when the company decides to downsize. The loss of our health as we get older, or of a loved one when cancer strikes. The loss of our dignity when we're discriminated because of the color of our skin. The loss of our innocence when someone takes advantage of us.

And as Christians, there is another, often deeply troubling layer to our loss: we believe in a *good, loving, and powerful God who sovereignly rules the universe*. A God who promises good to his people, who numbers our hairs and doesn't let a sparrow fall to the ground apart from his plan (Matt. 10:29-30).

And so when we experience suffering and pain, it inevitably drives us to ask honest questions not only about our situation, but ultimately about our God. Questions that very often lead us to the book before us, the book of Job.

This is the story of one man's devastating loss and the struggle to make sense of God in the midst of it. On the one hand, Job's story doesn't feel very applicable, because who among us can really compare either our suffering or our righteousness to that of Job? Here is "the supremely righteous man who sustains the most extreme calamities."<sup>1</sup> And yet, as Old Testament scholar

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<sup>1</sup> Francis I. Anderson, *Job* (TOTC 14; Downers Grove: IVP, 1976), 68.

John Walton observes, “Though the book does engage in extremes, it is not trying to minimize anyone else’s suffering in comparison, for suffering cannot be measured objectively. Regardless of where anyone’s experiences fit on the spectrum of pain and suffering, we are all prone to ask the same questions.”<sup>2</sup>

Why me? Why Ruby? Why would God let this happen to anyone, let alone his people? Why doesn’t he answer? *Where is God when the world falls apart?*

As Job declares in ch. 23:

*Oh, that I knew where I might find him,  
that I might come even to his seat!  
I would lay my case before him  
and fill my mouth with arguments.  
I would know what he would answer me  
and understand what he would say to me. (Job 23:3-5)*

The book of Job resonates with both the suffering we experience and the searching questions it generates. As another author puts it, “It is a staggeringly honest book. . . . a book that knows what people *actually say and think*—not just what they say publically in church. It knows what people say behind closed doors and in whispers, and it knows what we say in our tears.”<sup>3</sup>

What we might find surprising though, when we read it, is that Job doesn’t exactly answer all of the questions we bring to it. Perhaps the most common questions we go looking to solve in these pages are the problem of evil and the cause of suffering. How can a loving and powerful God allow evil to exist on earth, let alone be experienced by his people? Why do we suffer? Why does God do this? But if those are the questions you’re searching out in the book of Job, your search will be largely in vain.

Not because those questions are unimportant. They are honest and real. But they may not be as important as the questions Job actually raises and answers for us. In fact, we can summarize the book in a series of five questions,<sup>4</sup> which we’ll be looking at over the next five weeks:

1. *Do we worship God merely because of what we get out of it?* This is the Accuser’s question in ch. 1:9—“Does Job fear God for no reason?”
2. *Wouldn’t it be better to have never lived than to face such misery?* “Why did I not die at birth?” cries Job in 3:11. This is Job’s question of raw pain and lament.
3. *Can the righteous suffer?* “Who that was innocent ever perished?” (4:7). This is the question Job’s friends debate with him in chs. 4-37, as they probe the cause of suffering.

<sup>2</sup> John Walton, *Job* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 19.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Ash, *Job: The Wisdom of the Cross* (PTW; Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), 19, italics mine.

<sup>4</sup> My summary of five questions is based in part on Doug O’Donnell’s identification of three questions: “Does Job fear God for no reason?” “Do the righteous ever suffer?” And, “Is God righteous in all he does, even when he allows or ordains suffering?” See Douglas Sean O’Donnell, *The Beginning and End of Wisdom: Preaching Christ from the First and Last Chapters of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 106-113.

4. *Is God righteous when the righteous suffer?* This is the question Job poses throughout, and God finally answers in chs. 38-41, whether he can be in the right while his children experience wrongs.
5. *Is there mercy for those who speak folly?* Is there any recourse when we make wrong assumptions and wrong assertions about the character of God? This is the question answered for us in the conclusion, ch. 42.

And all of these work together to ask one overarching question: *Where is God when the world falls apart?* We'll explore each of these over the next five weeks as we look at selections from the major sections of this book. Today, we start with the Accuser's question, which is the springboard for the whole story of Job: *Do we worship God merely because of what we get out of it?*

## JOB 1–2 AND THE GOD OF SUFFERING

### Meet Job (1:1-5)

The story starts off with life as it was meant to be. Look with me at ch. 1:1-3:

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.<sup>2</sup> There were born to him seven sons and three daughters.<sup>3</sup> 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 of the east.

Here we meet a man who is described as one of the godliest and wealthiest people ever to live, certainly among those living in his day—"the greatest of all the people of the east." Now when that day was, we don't really know. Most people think the book of Job is set in the period of the patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It was probably written much later than that, but Job probably lived during that time. The fact that he doesn't appear to be an Israelite and there's no mention of the temple or the Law of Moses are a couple of reasons we think this.

It does appear to be a true story. That is, Job really did exist. This isn't a fable. Job's faith and perseverance are mentioned in the book of Ezekiel in the Old Testament and in the letter of James in the New (Ezek. 14:14, 20; Jms. 5:11). And as the author introduces us to Job here, he focuses on two things: his character and his prosperity.

Job is described as "blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil." That's pretty high praise, not only from the narrator, but from God himself later in v. 8. So what does it mean?

Sometimes we read words like "blameless" and we think people are talking about sinless perfection. That Job was "perfect" as the King James puts it. But that's not what the word means, and Job himself would disagree with it if it did. He refers to "the iniquities of [his] youth" in 13:26, and to his own sin in 14:16. Rather, as one author describes, "the word 'blameless' speaks of genuineness and authenticity. . . . 'personal integrity, not sinless perfection.' It is the opposite

of hypocrisy, pretending to be one thing on the outside but being something else on the inside.”<sup>5</sup> What you see is what you really get. And what you see in Job is a man who genuinely fears God and turns away from evil. He honors God as holy, and treats as he deserves to be honored.

We also learn about Job’s incredible wealth, measured in offspring and livestock. Seven sons and three daughters, ten kids in all. The Bible likes to use numbers like three, seven, and ten to depict completion and perfection. Thousands of sheep and camels, hundreds of oxen and donkeys, and many servants—an ancient fortune.

But among Job’s character and wealth, the narrator zeroes in on his character in vv. 4-5, particularly his religious commitment.

His sons used to go and hold a feast in the house of each one on his day, and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them.<sup>5</sup> And when the days of the feast had run their course, Job would send and consecrate them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all. For Job said, "It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed<sup>1</sup> God in their hearts." Thus Job did continually.

We see Job’s righteous character not only in his own personal integrity, but in how he makes intercession for his children. We shouldn’t read this as though his kids were frequent party animals and Job was constantly going around cleaning up their mess, trying to keep God from striking them down. The picture is much different. He’s not concerned about what they’ve done or said outwardly in their feasts, but the possibility that one of them may have for some reason denounced God secretly in their hearts. He cares not just about their outward appearance, but also the condition of their hearts, and so acts as a family priest offering sacrifices for sin before God.

This is the good life, in ancient terms. An abundant family, a personal fortune, and a healthy relationship with God. Life as it was meant to be lived, right?

### **Meanwhile in Heaven (1:6-12)**

When we come to v. 6, the scene changes. All of a sudden we find ourselves in heaven, sitting in on what appears to be a divine council meeting. Verse 6: “Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them.” A few questions: who are the “sons of God”? What are they doing in heaven? And why in the world is Satan there?

Here Job gives us a unique window into the governance of heaven. God alone is sovereign; he is the only God, the only Creator; all else are creatures. As one scholar puts it, he “needs no advice or consultants (Isa. 40:13-14), but it is his prerogative to discuss his plans with others as he wills and to delegate responsibility at his discretion.”<sup>6</sup> And so God has chosen exercise his heavenly rule through heavenly beings created for that purpose, whom the author here calls “sons of God” (cf. Ps. 82; 1 Kgs. 22:19-23). Some of those heavenly beings are angels, which means “messengers,” sent to deliver messages on earth. And some of them operate primarily in the

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<sup>5</sup> Ash, 31.

<sup>6</sup> Walton, 63.

heavenly realm; think of Isaiah's vision of God's throne room in Isaiah 6, with the seraphim there, or Revelation 5 with the four living creatures.

So God is holding council with his heavenly servants, and in walks Satan. And scholars have debated, is he crashing the meeting, or is he actually part of the council, functioning as a kind of "loyal opposition"?<sup>7</sup>

When we look at this passage, and especially ch. 2 where he comes "among the sons of God," it seems that he is probably part of the council. Nobody seems shocked that he's there (as if anyone could actually crash God's meeting). Grammatically speaking, the word Satan here is probably not a name, but a title—"the satan." It means the adversary, the accuser. He's the district attorney of heaven, the prosecutor in God's court. When God asks him in v. 7, "from where have you come?" he's probably asking for his report. Do you have any charges to make?

The Accuser says that he has been roaming the earth, presumably looking for people he might indict, but before he can make any accusations, the Lord, somewhat surprisingly draws his attention to Job. Verse 8: "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?"

It almost feels like the Lord is daring the Accuser to find something wrong with Job. But we need not read it that way. He may simply be pointing out to the Accuser that there are in fact people who still fear God and want to worship him, and Job is the chief example.

But haters gonna hate. The Accuser does what accusers do, and challenges God that the only reason Job worships him is *because of what he gets out of it*. All his family and fortune. Verse 9:

"Does Job fear God for no reason? <sup>10</sup> Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. <sup>11</sup> But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face." (1:9-11)

Here is the question that launches this whole harrowing tale: Does Job fear God for no reason? In other words, does he worship God merely because of what he gets out of it? Prosperity, progeny, protection. It's easy to trust God in times of plenty; what about times of want? Remove those things, Satan says, and you'll reveal the true condition of his heart.

It's actually a really good question—do we worship God merely because of what we get out of it? What would be revealed in our hearts if God took everything away? How many of us would pass that test?

The shocking thing is that God accepts the Accuser's challenge. Verse 12: "And the LORD said to Satan, 'Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand.' So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD."

There are three things we should note here. First, *the Lord has remarkable confidence in Job*. And concern for him—there's really only one way to vindicate Job before his accuser. That's to let him pass through the fire.

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<sup>7</sup> See Ash, 40.

Second, we see here something we see throughout the Scripture, that *suffering is not outside of God's plan*. Sometimes God accomplishes his plans not by rescuing us from it, but by carrying us through it.

Third, that *through this test God remains in absolute, sovereign control*. He permits Satan to test Job, but notice the restrictions he places on him—restrictions Satan is bound to honor. “Only against him do not stretch your hand.” Satan is a roaring lion, but that lion is still on a leash. He can do nothing more than God allows him to do according to his sovereign plan.

But none of that necessarily makes what happens next easier to swallow.

### **The First Strike against Job (1:13-22)**

The scene changes once again, and we're back on earth in vv. 13-22. A single day that changes everything. His children are gathered again in their oldest brother's house for a feast; Job is elsewhere, and then the reports start coming. First is news that he has lost his entire herd of oxen and donkeys to raiders. And before that messenger is done, another shows up to tell him that all of the sheep are gone, consumed by fire from heaven. And before that servant is done speaking, another shows up to announce that the camels have all been stolen. And before he is done, comes the most devastating blow of all: his children. All ten of his children, feasting in the house of their brother, when “a great wind came across the wilderness and struck the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young people, and they are dead” (1:18).

It's like wading along the shore of the ocean, and being caught off guard by a crashing wave. And before you can find your feet another one hits, and then another, and then another, until you wash up on shore, breathless and defeated. Job has lost everything. *Everything*. How will he respond?

Verse 20:

Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped.  
<sup>21</sup> 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." <sup>22</sup> In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong. (1:20-22)

Unbelievable. What integrity! What faith!

He's devastated. He responds in deep grief and sorrow, tearing his robes, shaving his head, falling to the ground—acts of bitter mourning and lament. But what does he do when he falls to the ground? He *worships*. He accepts his lot from the hand of the Lord. “The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.”

Does Job worship God only because of what he gets out of it? Or does Job worship God because he is worthy, regardless of his personal circumstances? The answer is clear. But the story isn't over.

## **The Accuser at It Again (2:1-10)**

You would think that this would be enough to refute the Accuser's accusations, but as ch. 2 begins and the heavenly council is convened, the Accuser is at it again, and again the Lord holds up Job as a model. "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? He still holds fast his integrity, although you incited me against him to destroy him without reason." (2:3).

Satan has already been proven wrong once, but he doesn't let up. He comes back with the same charge from another angle. "Skin for skin! All that a man has he will give for his life. But stretch out your hand and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face" (2:4-5). Job may have passed the first test, but that's only because he has a high threshold. His threshold will break. Remove his health, and you'll reveal the true condition of his heart. He will curse you to your face.

Again, almost beyond belief, God grants his request. "Behold, he is in your hand; only spare his life" (2:6). Satan still wears a leash, but his teeth are sharp. "So Satan went out 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" (2:7-8).

It's hard to imagine a lower point in life. Many of us know what it's like to walk closely with God only to experience suffering in life. I think of our brother Gerritt VanWagenen, who with his wife, Julie, sold everything they owned and moved to Haiti to serve the Lord, and now is diagnosed with cancer. Some of us know what it's like to lose all our worldly possessions. Some of us know what it's like to lose children. Some of us know what it's like to live with chronic pain. But who among us have experienced all of that at once? It's unimaginable. So how will Job respond?

His wife has a suggestion. She's watched more than she can take, and in her only appearance in the book, she essentially takes up the Accuser's suggestion, v. 9: "Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die." How tempting would that be? But listen again to Job's astonishing response: "But he said to her, 'You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?' In all this Job did not sin with his lips" (vv. 9-10).

So what do we make of all of this?

## **Job and the God of Suffering**

We'll start with the Accuser's question, back in ch. 1:9: "Does Job fear God for no reason?" Do we worship God merely because of what we get out of it, or is it possible to worship God regardless of whether we receive blessing or disaster from his hand, but simply because he is worthy?

The answer here is Yes. It is possible to worship God with unselfish motives. And so the question for us is this: what's *my* motivation in worshipping God?

Do I follow God because I believe that he'll make me happy? Because that's the way to be healthy and successful? Have we bought into a version of the prosperity gospel, as though God owes us something for our faith and obedience? Or do I worship God simply because he is worthy? Because he is God and I am not?

Would he still be worthy without all the gifts he's given us? God loves to give his children good things, and we should enjoy the gifts he gives us. But what if he took the gifts away? Does my allegiance to God come with conditions? Will I only accept good from his hand, but not evil? Or am I willing to say with Job, "The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord"?

God is worthy of our worship whether we receive blessing or disaster from his hand.

But acknowledging this truth still leads us to ask hard questions about God. If he is worthy, if he is powerful, if he is in sovereign and in control, if he is loving and good, why *would* he do something like this? Why would he entertain Satan's accusations? Why would he give him so much rope? Why would he allow his children to suffer, when so many people who turn their backs on God seem to have it easy in life?

But the reality is, chs. 1-2 don't answer the *Why* question. And as we'll see, neither really does the rest of the book. We'll talk more about that in the weeks ahead.

But these chapters *do* answer the *Where* question. Not yet for Job, but very clearly for us. Where is God when the world falls apart?

*He's on his throne.*

That realization may seem outrageous to some. 'You mean you could do something about this and you're not? Are you not powerful enough? Not good enough? Have you lost control of your heavenly servants?'

But that's not the portrait we see. We see a sovereign Creator, unique in power, exclusive in deity, unparalleled in majesty, ruling his earth from heaven.

To recognize that God is on his throne amid our suffering may be outrageous to some. But to others, it's a cause for worship. *God is on his throne!* He's got this. Whatever this is, I have hope because the God who holds the entire universe in the palm of his hand, holds me too.

And as Christians reading Job on this side of the cross, we have an even deeper sense of hope, because we know that not only is God on his throne amid our suffering, but that Jesus his Son took his throne by taking our place on the cross. That's where he received his crown, when he suffered and gave his life in our place. Christianity is the only religion in the world where our God knows what it means to suffer.

In fact the parallels between Job and Jesus are quite breathtaking. Christopher Ash explains:

Job in his extremity is actually but a shadow of a reality more extreme still, of a man who was not just blameless but sinless, who was not just the greatest man in a region, but the greatest human being in history, greater even than merely human, who emptied himself of all

his glory, became incarnate, and went all the way down to a degrading, naked, shameful death on the cross, whose journey took him from eternal fellowship with the Father to utter aloneness on the cross. The story of Job is a shadow of the greater story of Jesus Christ.”<sup>8</sup>

And so we grieve with Job when the world falls apart. We don’t minimize the severity. And as we’ll see next week, neither do we muzzle our complaints. But we also worship with Job. God is on his throne. Shall we receive good from his hand and not evil? God is worthy of our worship whether we receive blessing or disaster from his hand.

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<sup>8</sup> Ash, 54. See also O’Donnell, 114-117.