

Job 1:1, 2:1-10

There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.

Job 2:1 One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the LORD. 2 The LORD said to Satan, "Where have you come from?" Satan answered the LORD, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." 3 The LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason." 4 Then Satan answered the LORD, "Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives. 5 But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face." 6 The LORD said to Satan, "Very well, he is in your power; only spare his life."

7 So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD, and inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. 8 Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes.

9 Then his wife said to him, "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die." 10 But he said to her, "You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

MUFFINS AND PARKING PLACES

A Presbyterian pastor in North Carolina tells about a woman who came to see him on her lunch break. Nicely dressed, dignified, late thirties woman. Her face revealed a mixture of indignation and great sadness.

There was a woman in her Sunday church School class, a teacher, who was always talking about how wonderful it was to walk and talk with Jesus. She would tell how everything she asked Jesus for she received.

She prayed that her blueberry muffins would be perfect and they always were. Jesus, she would say, is wonderful to have around.

She told of rushing somewhere to do the Lord's work and she would say: "Lord you know that I am coming down here to do your work and I am running late so I need a parking space and always someone would be pulling out of the space at exactly the right time." Jesus was so good to have around, she would say!

The woman did not know whether to be angry with God or crushed because God never answered her prayers.

She admitted she had never pestered God for tasty muffins or parking spaces, but for ten years she had been praying for just one thing. She had a physical problem that could not be cured. Then she asked:

"What kind of Jesus was this who liked that other woman so much he would jump at her beck and call and grant her silly requests, but who did not like me enough to take away my pain. It makes me angry and it hurts!"

What would you say to that woman's anger and hurt?

The book of Job reminds us that life is not simple. God does not always reward virtue with success.

But, a lot of people believe the opposite. Millions of people swear by a hyper-positive religion.

If you think positively and tell people how much Jesus has given to you, then you will be a success. You will have peace of mind and you will be spared life's painful experiences. God will put a fence around you and keep all those bad things out.

There's only one problem with that theory. It doesn't square with the message of the Bible. Take for example our lesson for today from the book of Job.

JOB'S STORY

Once upon a time there was a man named Job. Job was a good man. He feared God and turned away from evil.

And Job was very wealthy. To use today's language we might say that Job was one of the one percent. He had it all. He had a nice family, a good job and a beautiful home in the suburbs.

But, Job's faith was about to be tested.

Up in heaven Satan said to God, "Of course he's a nice guy. Anybody can be a nice guy if he has everything. Suppose he lost all of that? How faithful would he be then? Let me test him."

So God agreed to a test. Satan would be allowed to take almost everything away from Job. His possessions and his family (except for his wife) would all be destroyed in one afternoon.

But, much to the surprise and chagrin of Satan, Job did not curse God for his bad fortune. Instead, Job said, "We don't really own anything anyway. The Lord gives. The Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

So Satan proposes a second test. Satan says, "People will do anything to save their own skin. Let's take away Job's health and see how much faith he really has." And God agrees to the test. God allows Satan to make Job deathly sick, but God decrees that Job must not be allowed to die.

Job is covered with sores from head to toe. He is miserable to look at and miserable to live with. And Mrs. Job suggests that he just curse God and die already.

But, instead of cursing God Job tells his wife, "You're acting like you don't have good sense woman. God gives us good days and bad days. But, every day is God's day."

JOB'S ENDURING FAITH

Job lost what we often prize the most. He lost family and fortune. He lost his health. But, Job did not lose his faith in God.

In this regard Satan lost his "bet" with God. This is what Satan really wanted to take from Job, his faith in God.

But, Job was too good a theologian to fall for Satan's ploy. Job did not believe that the blessings of life were "rewards" for his hard work and righteous living. All that he had was due to God's grace. And none of it would last forever.

We mortals cannot control what happens in our life. Blessings come and blessings go. And, as Job put it, the only suit of clothes guaranteed to any of us is our "birthday suit".

But, Job put his trust in the one who gave him birth. Job believed that the One who created the heavens and the earth could be trusted in good times and bad. Job did not believe that the goodness of God was determined by the circumstances of life.

Robert Browning wrote after spending a day in nature when the weather was good and all was going well, "God's in his heaven ... all's right with the world." I like those words. I've experienced days like that.

But, what do we believe when it's raining cats and dogs? What do we believe when greedy people steal our money, and an ill wind blows through the land? What do we believe when sickness darkens our day and makes every moment a struggle?

Is God still in his heaven?

Or do we think that God doesn't know or even care what happens to us? Do we think the evil one has been given free reign in this world?

Or maybe we just think that no one is in charge, that life is just one thing after another.

THE MOST IMPORTANT QUESTION?

Difficult days still present a great challenge to faith. Several years ago Bart Ehrman published a book entitled "God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer".

Professor Ehrman said that the problem of suffering "haunted me for a long time." And because he could not find a satisfactory answer to this question he could no longer be a Christian. Ehrman said that the simplistic answers of the Bible didn't provide him a suitable explanation for the problem of suffering.

Take Job's story for example. In the professor's estimate Job is a primitive, fumbling attempt to answer why suffering occurs. But, Ehrman suggests that the book fails miserably, and the Bible fails miserably.

Is the professor right? Does God fail us on the most important question of life?

If we ask the wrong question, we get the wrong answer. The book of Job is not trying to explain why we suffer. Yes, God does seem to allow Satan to take over for a while in Job's life.

But, is that really the point of the story?
I think not.

A bit later in the story some of Job's "friends" come by with their own suggestions as to why Job has suffered so much. They have answers. Maybe Job has done something wrong and is being punished. Maybe Job just "appears" to be righteous but maybe deep down inside he's got a terrible secret.

His friends tell him, "Just have faith. Confess your sins. Life's short. Pray hard."

Do any of those answers sound familiar?

I have found that the greatest challenge to faith is not the suffering that comes my way. The greatest challenge is the half-baked theology thrust upon us by smug believers who think that they are the righteous ones.

Job does not allow these so-called comforters to put a guilt trip on him. He sends them all away.

GOD COMES TO JOB

But, Job does finally begin to wonder about the question that everyone else has been asking. Why did this happen to him? Why did this suffering come into his life? Job's lament continues for many chapters. We talk about the patience of Job, but in much of the story Job is a lot like us. He doesn't seem so patient.

In the end, Job never does get an answer to his questions.

Instead, Job gets God. God blows in and speaks through a mighty wind.

In the presence of the Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, Job doesn't need to ask any more questions. Job is a mortal man subject to bane and blessing. But, God is eternal.

To put another way, God is God and Job is not. And that is his "answer".

One man reflected on his spiritual journey in this way. He said,

"You know, I spent the first thirty years of my life putting a series of questions to God: How can I believe in the resurrection? Why is there suffering in the world? Why don't you reveal yourself to me and make belief easier?"

He continued, "But now I have changed. I have decided to just have faith in God, to seek God's love instead of God's answers.

Now I'm trying to let God ask me questions: What are you doing with the life I gave you? What have you done for the suffering of others lately?"

We live in a very self-centered world in which people are always thinking that their problems are the most important. We think that there's no suffering like my suffering. There's no pain like my pain.

But, the Bible challenges that view. The Bible tells us that too much suffering is not our biggest problem. Our biggest problem is not enough God.

And Jesus tells us that when a person has God in their life they can even suffer willingly. They can take up a cross, and follow him. They can take up the suffering of others out of love and even lay down their life for the sake of others.

THE FAITH OF JOB

Job struggled with the trials that came his way, but Job is also an example of great faith. Job believed that the power and goodness of God transcended the circumstances of life. Job was that rare person who focused more on God than on his problems.

Later as God revealed Himself more fully in the person of His Son, Jesus, we learn just how precocious Job really was. In fact, you might even consider Job's story a kind of foreshadowing of the story of Christ.

Job's suffering was not the meaningless pain that it is often portrayed to be. It is a story of triumph over evil and the tragedies of life.

It is an affirmation that the Creator is able to overcome every power that threatens to destroy us. It is a kind of resurrection story where the wiles of Satan are overcome by the power and grace of God.

In good times and bad God is with us and for us. And God calls us forward in faith.

Life is too tough for a simplistic, superstitious faith. God did not build a fence around Job to protect him from life's troubles. And God does not build a fence around our life either.

Evil and destruction find their way into every life.

What we need is a grown up faith that takes this into account. We need a hope that is high enough to lift us up even when life falls apart.

In Christ we have such a hope. In Christ God takes the ultimate symbol of evil and suffering, the cross and turns it into the ultimate symbol of hope. God takes a cruel means of execution and turns it into the sign of salvation.

In Christ we see that salvation comes through body broken and blood shed. In Christ we see most vividly that God's power and grace are not limited by suffering. In Christ we see that God's salvation can even come through unjust suffering. As Paul put it, God's power is made perfect in weakness.

THORN IN THE FLESH

Don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying that suffering is some form of spiritual aerobics. Suffering is not good for you. A cross is still a cross. The old hymn has it right; the cross was the emblem of suffering and pain.

But, in God's hands the cross is transformed. And in God's hands we are transformed.

The Apostle Paul had a dramatic revelation of God that at times caused him to be arrogant. Paul admitted as much when he wrote,

“To keep me from being too elated by the abundance of Revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger from Satan, to harass me, to keep me from being too elated.

Three times I prayed to God about this, that it should leave me, but he said ... My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

It is obvious that God heard Paul’s prayer. But, God did not answer Paul’s prayer in the way the apostle wanted it answered.

And often God does not answer our prayers in the way we want them answered. Like Paul we must remember that God’s grace is enough for us, in good times and in bad. And sometimes in our weakness we discover the power of God’s grace and display the power of God’s grace in a deeper way.

When God gave Paul the bad news that his thorn in the flesh would not be healed, Paul made this courageous and faithful response. He said that from this time forward he would be content for Christ’s sake “with weakness, hardship and frustration ... For when I am weak, Christ makes me strong.”

BOB DAVIS’ STORY

On August 2, 1987 Bob Davis, the pastor of Old Cutler Presbyterian Church in Miami made a shocking announcement. The fifty two year old former All American football player who had been their pastor for 13 years had Alzheimer’s disease. Tears filled the eyes of the parishioners and the pastor as he made the announcement.

Bob said, “As a Christian I belong completely to Christ. My life is not my own but Christ’s. Today my ministry draws to a close and I can say with Paul; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith. Now I stand at the finish line in victory because God set the distance I was to run, and I am finished at fifty-two!”

Even this six foot seven hulk of a man was no match for Alzheimer’s disease, but his final word to the congregation gave them hope,

“Pray for Betty, my wife, as I turn things over to her. I will not suffer nearly as much as she will. Pray that in no way I inadvertently disgrace our Lord, this church or the people I love.

Finally, when I get to that stage where my mind is gone, pray that the Lord will take me home quickly. The glory of being with Christ makes me gasp with joy.”

When asked, “What about miracles?” Bob said that I am like Paul whose thorn in the flesh God did not remove. I don’t expect God will remove my Alzheimer’s

thorn. But, I have made up my mind to find joy in my weakness because that means a deeper experience of the power of Christ.

Why do we suffer? That's a question I can't answer.

But, I do know this. Faith is about more than having perfect blueberry muffins and parking spaces on demand. Faith is trusting in God's grace in good times and in bad.

God help us find joy in our weakness and experience the power of God's love in good times and in bad.

Amen.