

THE BOOK OF JOB
Job 1:6—3:26

By Dr. James E. Potts

Although we know nothing about Job's early life, we suspect that he was born right, grew right, and lived right until the times we meet him as an adult. Writers might have acclaimed him as they did Jesus when Luke writes, "***And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man***" (Luke 2:52).

Job is introduced to us with the same honor. He is almost too good to be true. Yet there is a missing part of his life. He has never learned to suffer. His perfection sets the stage for a new reality. Will Job's goodness stand the test of tragedy? As the prophet Jeremiah reminds us, it is one thing to run with footmen, but how will we do in a horse race? Or it is one thing to dwell in the land of peace, but quite another to survive when the Jordan River swells (Jer. 12:5). Job has yet to experience this kind of hard ship.

The scene temporarily shifts in our Scripture lesson now from Job on earth to God in heaven. In our glimpse into heaven, our setting has God in session with all the hosts of heaven, and it is reporting time. Suddenly God spots an intruder among His angels. Satan, himself, has come home. Surely His heart must have hurt when Satan at an earlier time had rebelled against Him to the point that God had no choice but to cast him out of the heavenly court along with a third of the angels.

We do not catch any hint of threat in God's words as He asks Satan matter-of-factly, "***Where are you coming from?***" In response Satan answers, "***From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it***" (1:7). Two different spirits are in this scene. God is calm and confident; Satan is restless and insecure.

Those who deny the existence of Satan will be quite difficult to explain this heavenly episode. But even for those who might believe that Satan is not real, his restless, wandering spirit cannot be denied. It is far more realistic to recognize the existence of evil in a personal form that targets our souls. Whoever wrote the Book of Job had the same view of Satan as being the essence of evil as Peter the Apostle did when he described Satan as a "***...roaring lion walking about, seeking whom he may devour***" (1 Peter 5:8).

God accepts Satan's answer and then asks him "***Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one***

that fears God, and shuns evil?” (1:8). Understandably, Job’s reputation has reached to heaven. As a matter of fact, God goes beyond the human commendation which identified Job as *“the greatest man among all the people of the east.”*

From God’s point of view, Job is one of a kind on earth. Again, we realize that no human being, other than Jesus Christ, received such praise by God. We also realize that Job’s righteousness went beyond a discipline based upon fear. When God asks Satan *“Hast thou considered My servant Job?”* He reveals a relationship of love and pride which is possible only between friends. As Abraham was called God’s friend because he believed in Him (James 2:23), the same might be said of Job. He was God’s friend as well as God’s model for righteousness on earth.

Satan’s answer to God’s question betrays his true character (1:9-11). His words are loaded with sarcastic skepticism. Satan has nothing good to say about anyone or anything. The miserable people you know are those who turn everything good into criticism. They cannot stand to be outdone. No matter what someone says, they have the superior answer. No matter how successful someone is, they can put them down. Five minutes in their presence and you want to run for your life.

But Satan is far worse. When God commends Job as one of the most honorable of people, Satan squashes His excitement by challenging Job’s motives. He says, *“Does Job fear God for nought?” (1:9).* There is just no way that Satan can understand a spiritual relationship in which Job loves God for His own sake, not for the blessings He bestows upon him.

Still, there is a sting for each of us in Satan’s question. How would we respond if asked, “Why do you serve God?” Deep down, we must confess that our motives are mixed. We may be like the man who converted to Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism all at the same time because he wanted to make sure that he covered all the bases.

Our motive for serving God may also be based on a mixture of guilty fears, earthly blessings, and eternal protection. God understands, but He desires for so much more from us and for us, *“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength...[and] Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” (Mark 12:30-31).*

While these words speak of a commandment, we are talking about a relationship more than a commandment. As God is love, He desires love as the essence of His relationship with us. Only love explains why He created the universe, only love

explains why He created us in His own image with the dignity, creativity, and freedom to make our own choices. If God has a need, it is for us to love Him for Who He is, not for what He does for us.

Next, Satan presses his case by challenging the integrity of God, ***“Hast not thou made a hedge about him, and about his house, and about all that he hath on every side? Thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his substance is increased in the land” (1:10)***. Only Satan could speak with such gall. God, not Job, is now the victim of his venom. Satan is saying that God, to win the love of His human creatures, must carry their favor by protecting and blessing them. But immediately after questioning God’s integrity, Satan challenges Job’s integrity, as he says, ***“But put forth thine hand now, and touch all that he hath, and he will curse thee to thy face” (1:11)***.

Reckless readers of the Book of Job see God and Satan in a contest of egos with Job as the innocent and helpless pawn. But if that were the case, the spiritual meaning of our story would be lost. Then the Book of Job would become nothing more than another betting game between two jealous and equal gods who manipulate humans for their own purposes.

Nothing else in the Book of Job supports that kind of view of God. Not even Job in the worst moments of suffering entertains such a distorted idea. Instead, we are to interpret this scene as an expressive picture of God’s utter confidence in Job. Knowing Job as He does, God is willing to lift His hedge of protection around His servant’s life in order to demonstrate the essence of their relationship.

It is important for us to understand at this point that God does not take Satan’s challenge to strike at Job’s possessions. God did not do that then, and He does not now. He does permit the attacks of Satan in the accidents of nature to afflict His people. We know that believers are no more exempt from suffering than non-believers. In all honesty, believers may be more vulnerable because of their sensitivity.

In the next scene of the Job story, we learn that God releases Satan to take away everything that Job has, but with the limit that he cannot touch Job’s life or health (1:12). Our confidence in a caring God rises as we read the Lord’s words. Perhaps we take for granted the hedge of protection God puts around our lives and the blessings of possessions that He gives to us. At the same time, we can be assured that He will not let Satan push us beyond our limits or destroy us. We can bank without question on the eternal truth in Paul’s promises to the Christians in Corinth, ***“God is faithful, who will not suffer [allow] you to be tempted above that ye are able; but***

with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it” (1 Cor. 10:13).

It is at the outer limits of our hard times and suffering where our faith is truly tested. And now we see that Satan pushes on those limits by engineering four devastating events which wipe out all of Job’s possessions—his herds, his caravans, his servants, and his children.

Let us move in for a closer look. It was on a feast day of high celebration, that a messenger came to Job with the tragic news that a roving band of Sabeans from southwestern Arabia had rustled his herds of oxen and donkeys and killed his servants (1:14-15). Then before the first messenger had finished speaking, another survivor of disaster arrived to announce that lightning, described as the fire of God, had ***“fallen from heaven [the sky]”*** and had struck and killed all the sheep and their shepherds. Next, a third messenger arrived with the bad news that an organized army of Chaldeans had surrounded Job’s caravans stolen his camels and killed their drivers and keepers (1:16-17).

But there is more—while still reeling from blow after blow, one more messenger arrives and gives Job the most tragic news of all, ***“Thy sons and thy daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother’s house: And, behold, there came a great wind from the wilderness, and smote the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young men, and they are dead; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee” (1:18-19).***

Both natural accidents and human evil serve Satan’s purpose in testing Job by tragedy. The lightning which is described as ***“the fire of God fallen from heaven”*** and the tornado which crushed Job’s children are so-called “acts of God” which we cover by insurance today. But in truth, they are the random acts of nature which cannot be prevented or controlled.

The Sabeans were land pirates of evil intent who lived by plunder and died by violence. This was not the case of the Chaldeans who stole Job’s camel caravans. They represented an organized army of a nearby nation whose foreign policy for the elimination of competition. So, we see that when God lifted His hedge of protection from around Job’s life, his sheep and children became innocent victims of natural accidents. But when Satan took the attacks for the cause of evil, he had no trouble finding evil in people and nations to do his bidding.

We are not told about Job's reactions to the tragic news until the messenger told him about his children's death. Then we see his agony as he went into deep and intense mourning (1:20). And out of his grief he cried, "***Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord***" (1:21). How can a man face the loss of all that he loves and still praise God? Yet, these are the same words that we hear at the graveside when our loved ones die. Somehow, somehow, we find strength to bear shattering losses.

Job withstood the shock of the natural disasters that wiped out his family and his fortune. Through his mourning he reaffirmed his faith in God; and contrary to Satan's skeptical expectations, he "***sinned not, nor charged God foolishly [with being unreasonable]***" (1:22). Most of the time we are not guilty of blaming God for unexpected tragedy. We may wonder why we or our loved ones are the victims of natural disaster or human evil—why bad things happen to good people—but we do not seriously accuse God of being the author of what happened.

Something more than just courage or faithful acceptance was behind Job's response and reactions. Rather than assuming that he had a right to God's blessing or that he had earned God's favor with his own work and righteousness. Job was grateful for all that he had been given and for the time he had had to enjoy his blessings. In his words here, he thanked God not only for what had been given him but also for the privilege of having had them.

To be able to thank and praise God in time of tragic loss requires the maturity of faith that comes only after mourning. Yet, after people who lose family and fortunes work through their grief, a sure sign of healing is their ability to thank God for the memory of their blessings. The loss is just as great and the pain is just as deep, but out of it all emerges a unique statement of faith.

As we read this part of our Scripture lesson, we see that Satan does not know how to blush. Rather than being embarrassed by his failure with Job, he boldly reappears "***before the Lord***" (2:1). He is asked the same question as before, "***From whence comest thou?***" And Satan responds as he did the first time, "***From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it***" (2:2). Then God asks once again, "***Hast thou considered my servant Job?***" (2:3). But this time God added, "***... and still he holdeth fast his integrity, although thou movedst me against him, to destroy him without cause***" (2:3).

While God can never be the origin of evil or a partner in the ruin of His creation, still, God was accepting responsibility for Job's tragedies. But there may be a deeper meaning here. Is it possible that God is so identified with Job that He participates personally in the suffering of His servant?

To better understand God's response, compare His words with Satan's curse. Not a shred of remorse or responsibility is heard as the Evil One lashes out, "***Skin for skin, yea, all that a man hath will he give for his life. But put forth thine hand now, and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse thee to thy face***" (2:4-5). In other words, Satan is saying that a person will give up most anything in the interest of staying alive, but when body and life is threatened, that is another matter—"***he will curse thee to thy face***" (2:5).

Satan exposes the true nature of sin. It is pure selfishness. Satan cannot believe that Job might have loved his children as much as his own life. But he assumes that Job will do anything to save his own skin.

With this kind of argument, Satan never loses. He only retreats into a rationalization for his defeat in order to attack again. We make a fatal mistake when we assume that a victory over Satan sends him off with his tail between his legs. Keep this picture of Satan in mind—his primary objective is to go "***to and fro in the earth***"—roam back and forth across the earth—looking for souls he can destroy.

We remember that even in the case of Jesus the temptation in the wilderness at the beginning of His ministry did not defeat Satan. He came back to Jesus again and again with variations on his original temptations to physical gratification, social status, and material wealth. And it was in the Garden of Gethsemane that Satan put Jesus through the ultimate test. Would He give up His own life in shame in order to save people from their sins? Not until Jesus sacrificed Himself was Satan defeated. Still, because God permits Satan to exist and work within limits, the Tempter levels every weapon in his arsenal at our selfishness—the center of our morally corrupt nature.

Next, we see that God's confidence in Job holds steady. He is willing to let Satan test Job at the center of his soul, with one condition. His life must be spared (2:6). Losing no time, Satan afflicts Job with "***sore boils from the sole of his foot unto his crown***" (2:7). The man who cut a healthy, handsome, and honored figure in all the ancient Near East is suddenly reduced to a scratching and scraping of scabby flesh on an ash heap. Whether it is the physical pain or the social disgrace, the seriousness

of Job's disease is pictured in living color by his wife's reaction, ***“Dost thou still retain thine integrity? Curse God, and die” (2:9).***

Critics have criticized Job's wife for centuries. Judgments on her have ranged from the lack of faith in her husband to being the Devil's handmaiden. But I think she deserves better. Satan has a way of using those who love us most as his instruments. Our spouses become so closely identified with our destiny that when we suffer, they suffer.

Job's wife asked the question that had to be in her husband's mind. If something is the result of sin as was taught in the Wisdom School, then the grotesque nature of his disease had to raise questions about his integrity. Rather than see her loved one suffer that kind of agony and humiliation, out of love for him she suggests that he curse God and die as a way out of his suffering. Given the same circumstances, what would we say?

Job has fallen from the peak of human greatness to the pit of social disgrace. Because of the stigma of his disease, his lot in life is reduced to an ash heap outside the protection of the city walls.

Each generation has illnesses that it does not know how to handle. In our day, stigma is attached to AIDS, aging, anorexia, Alzheimer's disease, and Covid 19, not that there is necessary a stigma as the others. But with the threat of being an epidemic that has wiped out huge amounts of people, our fears border on panic.

At least from our vantage point as believers, we have the hope of eternity. Job had no such hope. The life cycle of plants and animals, for instance, includes conception, birth, growth, maturity, and death, but not eternal life. So, for the students of the Wisdom School of Job's time who drew their theology from nature, there was absolutely no hope for life after death. They believed that at death the human soul departed to a land of shadows without personal existence. Job hung to life because he had nothing for which to die.

When news of Job's misfortune reached his three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, they made plans to visit him before he died. Usually these three men are considered outcasts as friends and merciless comforters. But nothing is farther from the truth. Scripture informs us that the three friends lived in distant separate cities and with the mail being notoriously slow and uncertain, it must have been months before they got word of his plight. Perhaps weeks and months, passed before they made contact with each other and arranged to meet at a common point in order to travel

together and visit their friend. Think about it, how many friends do we have who would go to the same lengths to visit us? So, rather than prejudging. Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, we should honor them as the kind of friends whom we need and want in our hard times of suffering.

The devastating nature of Job's disease is pictured vividly when we learn that his friends did not even recognize him as they approached the ash heap. Having seen Job in all his glory as the greatest man in the East, they were shocked to see his robe in shreds, his face disfigured, and his seat of honor turned into a mound of ashes. With the stench of death in the air, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar joined Job in his mourning—tearing their own robes and tossing ashes over their own heads (2:12). For them, Job was as good as dead, and as good friends, the least that they could do was share in his death watch.

They stayed beside him for seven days and seven nights of silent mourning (2:13). But then their legalism overruled their friendship. Having done their duty, they arose to leave, but Job reacted immediately. Even though he was skating on the edge of death, he was far from dead.

Have you ever wished that you had never been born? Job went to these depths after seven days of dreadful suffering when his friends respected his pain with the comfort of silence. Sometimes silence is the most eloquent language we can speak in the presence of unbearable pain. To force the sufferer to talk only adds to the agony. Personal presence is quite enough. To the credit of Job's three friends, they were sensitive to his needs, not with the comfort of sound, but with the comfort of silence.

Finally, Job could not take any more: no more pain, no more shame, no more silence. The patience for which he was known ran out. With a cry that pierced the desert air, he cried out and cursed the day that he was born (3:1). As if he could turn back time, he wished that he could darken the day and wipe out the night of his birth (3:2-10). Once these words came out of his mouth, Job's bottled-up feelings came forth like water from a fire hose as he asked the question "*Why?*" time and time again, "*Why died I not from the womb?*" (3:11) ... "*Why the breast that I should suck?*" (3:12) ... "*Or as an hidden untimely birth I had not been; as infants which never saw light?*" (3:16).

Job pictures death as peace from his pain, rest from his turmoil, and freedom from his captivity. Job sees death as the great equalizer in which the small and the great, the wicked and the weary, at rest, and free.

Job's cry goes on deeper as he continues to ask "Why?" No longer is he cursing the day of his birth; now he is questioning the fairness of life for those who suffer unbearable physical, emotional, and spiritual pain. He seems to be asking, why is life given "... *to him that is in misery?*" (3:20) ... "*which long for death, but it cometh not?*" (3:21) ... "*to man whose way is hid?*" (3:23).

Issues of abortion and euthanasia are not new. Job is raising questions about the beginning and the end of life. In effect, he is saying, "If we know the suffering which a baby will go through later in life, isn't it merciful to neglect or abandon the child?"

For modern medicine, the question is real. If a seriously handicapped child is born who is condemned to suffer until early death, should extra measures be taken to keep the child alive? Or at the other end of the spectrum, if a person is hopelessly ill and longs for death, should life-saving treatment be continued? The weight of these questions illustrates the despair of Job. Of all men, he is most miserable.

Sooner or later, each of us faces the same circumstances. It is some comfort to know that a person as good as Job asks our questions for us. But our greatest hope rests in the fact that Jesus, Himself, when He confronted the excruciating pain and the shame of the cross, He, too, asked God, "*Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from Me.*"

Job's distress has not yet robbed him of his hope, but he is close. In a pitiful summary of his suffering, he speaks of "*sighing's [that] cometh before I eat*" and *roaring's [groanings] ... poured out like the waters*" (3:24). Then he confesses that what he feared and dreaded had come upon him (3:25). The peace, quietness, and rest which he enjoyed during his days of glory are gone. All is now chaos—literally the churning of the soul (3:26).

By admitting that he feared and dreaded the day when he might lose his health, wealth, family, and fame, Job is unpleasantly honest. Underneath the peace and prosperity that so many of us enjoy, the same fear and dread hang about and trouble our night hours. Maybe we feel guilty about our blessings. For sure, we know that we do not deserve them. But most of us cannot confess our fears and horrors. They expose too much of our soul. As in Job's case, his honesty will cost him dearly. In his question "Why?" his friends heat a shout against God and in his confession of horror and fear, they sense the guilt of sin.