

Why Suffering?
Wisdom's Word on Suffering: Sermons from Job, Part 1

Job 1:1-6, 2:1-10

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First
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I

Long, long ago...
 in a land far, far away—
 the land of Uz—
 there lived a man by the name of Job.

Job was a devout man...a pious man in the best sense of the word.

Job is described as “*blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.*”

Job was also a prosperous man,
 possessing herds of sheep and camels,
 goats and oxen in abundance,
 hundreds of servants,
 and the proud father of ten children.

Job was “*the most influential man in all the east!*” (The Message)

II

Unbeknownst to Job, two conversations take place in heaven that are about to have an enormous impact on his life.

God has summoned the angelic servants to the heavenly court to report,
 and among them is one called *the satan*.

The very first thing we need to understand is that this is not the character named “Satan” that we later meet in the pages of the New Testament—

the diabolical devil who puts Jesus to the test,
 is served by demonic spirits,
 and foments evil in the world.

That is a far later development in the Bible's understanding of the source and nature of evil.

Any pop culture image you might have in your mind of the devil dressed all in red with horns and a pitchfork...

any *Far Side* cartoon showing comic images of the devil and his minions marching poor, doomed souls down to the fiery pit of hell...

any Dana Carvey *Saturday Night Live* Church-Lady sketch:
 "Could it be...Satan!?"...

all of that is as far removed from the Book of Job as it could possibly be.

To read back into Job the much later notions of Satan the devil is to misunderstand the story of Job.

In the Hebrew text the word *satan* is not a proper name.

Unfortunately, many translations, including the RSV, NRSV, NIV, The Message, and many others, confuse us by choosing to capitalize it as a proper name, whereas the Hebrew with the definite article, *ha satan*, is more accurately his job title.

In Job, *the satan* is one of God's servants whose task, it would appear, is to go about the earth keeping track of whether or not God's human creatures are measuring up to God's standards.

He is "the Accuser," "the Adversary," and seems to function as a kind of cosmic prosecuting attorney.

Presbyterian pastor Fred Anderson calls him *God's quality control agent*.

And whatever else we might say of *the satan*,
 he is first and foremost God's servant,
 subject to God's commands and God's power.

Here then is the first challenging word from the Book of Job:
 nothing happens to Job that God does not allow!

God remains sovereign in suffering and it is God who permits the Accuser to afflict our man Job with untold suffering and misery.

III

When the Accuser announces to the heavenly court that he has been walking to and fro on the earth doing this work, God asks,

Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him, a blameless and upright fellow who fears God and forsakes evil.

The Accuser responds,

But of course, and why not? Does Job fear God for nothing?

You have built a hedge around him; you have blessed him with so much.

Why shouldn't Job be upright and good and worship you?

But stretch out your hand and take all that away from him and surely he will curse you to your face.

Behind that response is an accusation about the real reason we human beings behave ethically and morally,
 the real reason we worship and serve God.

Is it out of a sense of awe and wonder,
 of love and devotion,
 that arises from the glory of who God is?

Or is it for a reward, a kind of *quid-pro-quo*?

The accusation is a wager God cannot refuse.

God tells the Accuser, *“Take everything away from Job, but do not harm him physically.”*

And so the rest of chapter 1 tells how in a single day Job was totally wiped out.

The Sabeans run off with his donkeys and oxen and slaughter the hired hands.

Lightning strikes his sheep barn and burns up the whole flock, not to mention the shepherds.

Bands of Chaldeans descend from the hills to rustle his camels and make short work of the camel drivers.

A tornado hits with such devastating force the house where his seven sons and three daughters are having a party that there isn't enough of them left in the wreckage to identify.

Everything Job has is gone, including his ten children.

But Job remains stubbornly righteous.

Tearing his clothing and shaving his head—
 traditional signs of contrition and humility—
 Job falls to the ground and worships God saying,

*“Naked I came from my mother’s womb and naked shall I return there.
 The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away...
 blessed be the name of the Lord.*

“And in all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong-doing.” (v. 22)

IV

Chapter two is where the second conversation takes place,

and it is virtually a repeat of the first conversation.

God again champions Job's faithfulness and integrity even in the midst of disaster.

"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."

More determined still, the Accuser responds,

"Of course; Job has no skin in the game.

Skin for skin!

*Reach out your hand and touch his bone and his flesh
and he will curse you to your face."*

Again, the accusation cannot go unchallenged.

Again, the Lord accepts the challenge and puts Job into the Accuser's hands:

"Very well, he is in your power, but spare his life."

Skin for skin, indeed.

The Accuser afflicts Job with loathsome boils and sores from the soles of his feet to the top of his head.

Job is a hideous, revolting mass of scabs and lesions.

His only relief comes in taking a piece of broken pottery and scraping the festering sores,

as he sits on a heap of ashes in incomprehensible agony,
loathsome to everyone.

Look how far Job has fallen in just 35 verses—
from the heights of prosperity...
to the depths of despair;
from the pinnacle of affluence and influence...
to the ash heap of total desolation.

Even Job's wife is offended by his presence and adds to his misery by challenging him to end it all:

*“Do you still persist in your integrity?” she says,
“Curse God and die!” (2:9)*

She can no longer bear to witness the man she loves suffering so cruelly.

Job's wife is right about one thing:
it is his integrity that has brought this on him.

And that is another of the story's truths.

Some forms of suffering come to the righteous because of their integrity in a world that simply cannot abide it.

Integrity is honored in theory but pretty much despised in practice.

When the chips are down, it is far too easy to make uncomfortable accommodation to evil and its ways.

What happens to the stock broker who refuses to cooperate in the manipulations of insider trading?

What happens to the engineer who knows the automobile company has used computer software to fudge the vehicle's emissions on dynamometer testing?

How does one remain silent when unethical business practices take place?

Why are “whistle-blower” laws even necessary?

Let's not even raise the question of politics.

As we all know, integrity is the last thing that will get you elected.

Every politician worth his or her salt knows that the best way to remain in office,
perhaps the only way,
is to tell you constituents what you know they want to hear.

Yes, there is a kind of suffering that comes to the righteous because of their
integrity—
because they strive to remain upright in an unrighteous world.

V

Job's wife is right at a second level as well.

Cursing God would end Job's suffering as surely as if he took that potsherd and slit
his own throat.

She knows it and Job knows it as well.

But as tempting as that might be,
it would be a denial of what got him here in the first place:
his trust in and devotion to God and his personal integrity.

These are the things that have shaped him and caused him to deal justly with his
neighbors...
allowed him to be "the most influential man in all the east."

Denial of that would be a denial of himself.

It is precisely his sense of his personal integrity that will fuel Job's extraordinary
courage in contending with God and his friends as the story unfolds.

Job knows that he is innocent.

His wife may be ready to give up on God, but he is not.

Job disagrees with her...calls her a “foolish woman.”

The word “fool,” here, does not mean “silly woman” or “foolish girl.”

It is a far more powerful and inclusive term...

the same word the psalmist uses when saying,
“The fool has said in his heart “There is no God!”

Rather than answer her demand for him to curse God with a powerful statement as he did at the end of the first chapter,

Job now asks the question that takes us into the very heart of the Book of Job:

“Shall we receive the good from God and not receive the evil?”

Job is not in the position to see that this is not the hand of God at work in his life, but the hand of another accusing him.

And that is also an important message of the Book of Job.

We are at the transition point in the Bible’s understanding of evil and from whence it comes.

The earliest conviction of Israel was that both good and bad came from God’s hand as blessing and as curse.

Job’s response still reflects that conviction, but one of the things the Book of Job teaches us is that it is no longer an adequate answer.

As its concept of evil evolves, the Bible is not yet ready to move to a full-blown conviction about “the satan” as a transcendent, rebellious force of evil who vies with God as a would-be equal, striving to capture the souls of humankind and manifesting all forms of evil in the world.

It will take the New Testament to flesh out that understanding of Satan.

VI

So why does God permit the righteous to suffer?

The traditional answer was simple:

the person was not righteous;
there was some hidden sin that was being punished.

The Book of Job will ultimately test and reject that answer.

Bad things do happen to people.

Notice that I did not say “good people,”

as Rabbi Harold Kushner did in his famous book,
When Bad Things Happen to Good People.

Remember what Jesus said when the rich young man called him good—

*“Why do you call me good?
No one is good but God alone.”* (Mark 10:18)

In relationship to human beings, the word “good” is pretty slippery.

Each and every one of us is a mixture of good and evil intentions.

Each of us is capable of demonstrating noble qualities of love,

patience,
gentleness,
empathy,
kindness,
compassion.

Yet each of us is also equally capable of manifesting nefarious and diabolical behaviors—

the things that separate us from loving God as Job did...
and that separate us from our fellow human beings.

For example, consider all the ministers, educators, government workers, corporate executives, and “family-values” activists who were revealed by computer hackers

to have accounts with Ashley Madison, the adult-oriented web site whose motto is, “Life is short; have an affair.”

Is this also God’s wrath in action?

Remember, God’s wrath is most simply defined as God’s reflexive response to sin.

Certain behaviors will inevitably bring wrathful consequences.

Someone posted an example of this on Facebook the other day, a picture of a sign that read:

“Everything happens for a reason. Sometimes the reason is you are stupid and make bad decisions.”

This truth was demonstrated just this week when the story broke that the majority leader of the Indiana House of Representatives, whose political agenda was to “protect the integrity of the institution of marriage,” resigned after he inadvertently sent a sexually compromising video with a woman not his wife to his cell phone contact list.

Friends, God created a world where our actions have predictable consequences,
and sin is met with wrath,
both to keep it in check and to protect others.

But that is not the cause of Job’s suffering.

Job spends the next 35 chapters steadfastly maintaining his innocence in the face of suffering.

This is what some call innocent, meaningless suffering.

But looking deeply into the Bible, we learn there is no such thing.

All suffering has meaning even when the person is “innocent” as Job was innocent.

Sometimes suffering is a warning.

Sometimes suffering is a corrective.

Sometimes suffering is a witness.

And sometimes,
perhaps rarely,
suffering is redemptive.

In his suffering, Jesus Christ tasted death for everyone and through it he became the Author of salvation.

Only as we place our human sufferings into the grand and glorious context of Christ's suffering for the whole world can we begin to make sense of what on the surface seems so senseless.

VII

Czech artist Oldrich Kulhanek tried to make sense of it all in a provocative lithograph, his artistic rendering of the Job story.

Allow me to describe it to you:

Initially, we notice a man crouched down, on his knees, chest to the ground.

He is naked and gaunt,
head shaved,
face turned away.

At first, it seems that he must be the Job we meet on the ash heap—
forsaken,
destroyed,
broken...
a hollowed-out man.

But when we look closer, we see something else.

We see that this man is crouched over something.

He is holding something...
or is it someone?

When we look more closely still we see the faint outlines of another face,
another person underneath his chest,
being held,
being protected,
being embraced by this hollowed-out man.

And we realize that the figure underneath is Job.

Job is the one being held.

Job is the one clasped in the embrace.

Who, then, is this other one?

Who is this other suffering one whom we see...
naked and gaunt,
his head shaved,
his face turned away?

Who is he?

We look closer and see the very faint outline of a cross standing behind them—
tilted down,
touching the earth,
the empty cross of the One who suffered for Job...
for you...
for me....

Amen.

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