

# SUFFERING AND THE TRIUMPH OF GOD

## A Sermon on Job 1:1-12

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Suffering is a perennially relevant theological and pastoral problem. It is a problem that every true Christian must face. It is not a problem reserved only for extreme cases – people dying with cancer, for example. It is a problem, rather, that *every* believer deals with on a regular basis, for suffering from a Biblical viewpoint dominates the believer's life as long as he remains a pilgrim in this passing evil age, not yet enjoying the fullness of divine glory to be revealed when Christ returns.

The biggest problem that we face in suffering, and one that pastors must confront head on as they minister to those who are suffering, is the question, Why? Why does God permit His people to experience tribulation, physical and emotional pain, even the troubles and difficulties of everyday life?

One common answer to the why question is that suffering builds character. There is no doubt that this is one part of the total Biblical answer (Rom. 5:3-5). But is this all we can say Biblically? I want to step back and get the panoramic perspective of redemptive history in order to offer a deeper and more satisfying answer. I want to do so by examining the life of Job.

The title of my message, "Suffering and Triumph of God," offers you a hint of what I consider that more satisfying answer to be. I have chosen this title in order to suggest that the key issue in suffering is not your happiness but God's triumph, for according to the book of Job, God is achieving a mighty victory over the Enemy through your patient endurance in suffering.<sup>1</sup>

### *Exegesis of the text (Job 1:1-12)*

Let us begin by taking a look at our text. The text divides into two major sections. Verses 1-5 describes the earthly scene of Job's life, while verses

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<sup>1</sup> The basic interpretive approach taken here owes a great deal to the Biblical Theological insights of Meredith G. Kline, especially in his "Trial By Ordeal," in *Through Christ's Word: A Festschrift for Dr. Philip E. Hughes*, W. Godfrey and J. Boyd, eds. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1985), pp. 81-93.

6-12 open up for us the heavenly scene of a debate transpiring in the divine council in the upper register.

a. Verses 1-5: The Earthly Scene

We begin with the earthly scene in verses 1-5. It is helpful to note the alternating or chiasmic structure of this paragraph:

A. Verse 1 - General statement of Job's outstanding godliness

B. Verses 2-3 - Job's unparalleled prosperity

A.' Verses 4-5 - Specific illustration of Job's outstanding godliness

Verse 1 informs us of Job's outstanding godliness. "There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job; and that man was blameless, upright, fearing God and turning away from evil." It is only a general statement of his piety and reverence for God.

Next, in verses 2-3, the text describes Job's unparalleled prosperity. He had 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, 500 female donkeys. He was so wealthy, he was "the greatest of all the men of the east."

Verses 4-5 return again to the theme introduced in verse 1, Job's outstanding godliness. But this time we are given a specific illustration, which provides evidence of Job's outstanding godliness: Job was in the habit of offering sacrifice to atone for the sins of his children. This was no generic ancient near eastern practice. Job's offering of sacrifice was a clear indication that he exercised saving faith in the divine promise of the coming Seed whose death would constitute the final atonement for sin.

So up front, we are informed that Job is a man of faith and true Biblical piety. He is not of the line of Cain or the seed of the Serpent. He belongs to the sphere of redemption; he fears YHWH (v. 1). And this fear of YHWH flows from his saving trust in the Seed to come, whose sacrifice will be the final and ultimate provision for sin.

Now why are these first five verses here? There are two reasons. First, if you recall the rest of the story, Job's counselors believed that only the wicked suffer. Mercilessly pursuing this false logic they confidently charged Job with sin (e.g., Job 22:4-5). The opening verses of the book inform the

reader ahead of time that the accusations of Job's counselors are totally baseless, for Job is "blameless," one who fears God and turns away from evil.

The second function of this opening paragraph is that it raises a very important - and potentially troubling - question: What, if any, is the causal connection between Job's godliness and Job's prosperity? Is he prosperous because he is godly? Or is he godly because he is prosperous? No answers are put forth at this point, except to say that Job is both godly and prosperous. But this question will arise in the next section and will loom large as a major theological issue throughout the book.

#### b. Verses 6-12: The Heavenly Scene

The question of the relationship, if any, between Job's godliness and prosperity is now addressed explicitly in the second section, the heavenly scene (vv. 1-5). In this section, the scene shifts from the earthly arena of Job's family life and outward prosperity, to the heavenly arena in the presence of Almighty God in the heavenly council.

Here we are introduced to the sons of God, that is, the angelic hosts, and to Satan, the Accuser of the brethren. It is interesting to note that in verse 8 it is God who picks the fight with Satan. "Have you considered my servant Job?" God initiates the conflict, because He knows He'll win!

In verses 9-11, Satan lashes back:

"Does Job fear God for nothing? Have You not made a hedge about 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. But put forth Your hand now and touch all that he has; he will surely curse You to Your face."

Satan slanderously charges that Job's piety is not a product of true religious commitment, but is an outward display driven by a *quid pro quo* arrangement with God. Note the sarcastic tone of the opening question: "Does Job fear God for nothing?"

With this opening salvo, the conflict between YHWH and Satan has been engaged, and it centers on the question of the genuineness of Job's faith. Satan accuses Job of hypocrisy. Job's godliness is an outward display of bogus

ritual. By implication, Satan is ultimately accusing God of fraud. God's boast that there is none righteous like Job in all the earth (verse 8) is empty. For Job's apparent piety is not the result of a genuine process of redemption operating in Job's heart to transform him from a seed of the Serpent into a seed of the woman, but a cynical bargain struck with God whereby Job will be made rich in return for his service to YHWH.

### ***The outcome of the conflict***

This conflict in the heavenly council sets the stage for the rest of the book. From this point on, God and Satan are locked in mortal combat. Satan's accusations must be proven wrong. Job thus becomes God's champion, and Job's counselors become Satan's, just as Goliath and David were chosen as champions representing their respective armies (1 Sam. 17:3-4).

Incredibly, God's vindication against the Accuser's false charges hangs on the outcome of Job's faith! Will Job hold on to his faith even when no earthly benefit accrues? Will Job say, "Though God slay me, yet will I trust Him?" In the confidence that Job is indeed a trophy of the redemptive enmity promised and initiated in Gen. 3:15, God allows His servant to pass through the valley of the shadow of death. All earthly prosperity is stripped away. Even Job's body is stricken with boils.

How does Job do? At first, his response is one of pious resignation. "The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD" (Job 1:21). But beginning with chapter 3, and continuing through chapter 31, a root of bitterness against God begins to develop. Job condemns God in order to justify himself. In effect, Job agrees with the false theology of his counselors

In chapters 38-41, God finally answers Job's request for a face-to-face encounter. God speaks to Job out of the whirlwind, and demonstrates His sovereignty. In response Job repents of his bitterness against God *even while* utterly devoid of earthly prosperity. "Does Job indeed serve God for nothing?" Clear evidence of a positive answer is offered by the fact that at the end of the book we hear no more of Satan's outrageous claim that Job's faith is a sham. Satan is silenced. Indeed, Satan's representatives (the three friends) are rejected, for God says, "they have not spoken of Me what is right as my servant Job has" (42:7). Job spoke what was right when, at the

end, he made confession of his sin and thus vindicated God. Through His servant's confession of faith *de profundis*, God is vindicated against the Evil One's accusations. God has triumphed over the Enemy through the suffering of one whose faith, though severely tried, has proven to be genuine in the end. Job serves God not for any earthly gain but for God's sake alone, for God alone is his reward. Truly, Job's final confession of absolute confidence in YHWH while yet stripped of all outward blessedness can be attributed only to a sovereign work of divine grace in his heart.

### *A false theology demolished*

In light of all this, what is the theological significance of the life of Job? The first level meaning, is that we know one possible answer to the question, "Why does God allow His people to suffer?" is ruled out: the suffering of God's people is not an indication of a loss of divine favor. Outward prosperity is not proof of one's righteousness and acceptance before God; conversely, the absence of material blessing is not proof of rejection by God.

Job's three friends taught an incredibly naive theology of divine moral government. It was their belief that sinners always get their due and that the righteous always end up blessed. Thus, suffering is a sure indication of divine disfavor on account of sin. This popular answer to the why question is utterly demolished by the life of Job. As we have observed, the narrator takes pains to inform us at the very outset that Job was righteous, and at the end of the book God explicitly denounces the theological presuppositions of Job's counselors as "speaking falsely" of Him.

We need to be reminded that God's intentions cannot easily be discerned through providence. The divine speeches out of the storm theophany in chapters 38-41, in which God compares Himself to the mighty Leviathan and the Behemoth, poetically and powerfully teach us that God's ways are not man's ways, His thoughts not man's thoughts. God is sovereign, and does not need to answer to our finite moral calculations. This surely refutes the "health and wealth gospel" promoted by many false teachers today, a theology that is flatly contradicted by the message of the book of Job, not to mention the plain teaching of the New Testament (e.g., Rom. 8:35-37, among many others).

### ***Job a type of Christ***

But why does the book of Job end with God's restoring Job's fortunes twice over (42:10-17)? Doesn't this just reinforce the false theology of Job's friends, that the righteous ultimately are blessed in this life? It is at this point that we must view the life of Job in its proper redemptive historical context. The reversal of Job's fortunes can only be understood typologically, in terms of the exaltation of Christ.

Consider the points of similarity between Job and Christ. Both were God's champions in the conflict with Satan. In Gen. 3:15 God promises that He will finally accomplish the utter destruction of the Serpent's work through the suffering of the Seed to come. In the book of Job, God accomplishes a limited, typological victory over the Serpent through the sufferings of His righteous servant, Job. It is also significant that the lives of both Jesus and Job have a three part movement: they begin with the splendor and glory of divine favor, both are then humbled for a season and brought down to the very depths of agony and suffering, but in the end both are vindicated and highly exalted.

The book of Job must not be interpreted in isolation from the whole context of redemptive history which finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Of course, Job only imperfectly typified Christ. In his worst moments Job doubted God's goodness and justice, unlike Christ who obediently suffered under God's mighty hand without murmur or complaint. But this is true of the whole typological system of the Old Testament revelation. There is no question that David, a man after God's own heart, typified Christ, even though as a sinner his life was but a shadow - and sometimes even the antithesis - of Christ's perfect obedience.

### ***Why suffering? A redemptive historical answer***

This brings us then to the question with which we began. Why suffering? According to the book of Job, all suffering is for the redeemed a form of spiritual warfare. It is to be understood against the cosmic backdrop of Satan's boastful wager with God, slanderously questioning the effectiveness of the redemptive enmity promised in Gen. 3:15 to secure a people that will serve God for God's sake alone.

What is at stake in this war? Not your faith and perseverance, but *Christ's*. The issue is the legitimacy of God's claim to have fulfilled Gen. 3:15 through Christ and through the application of Christ's work by the effectual calling of the elect throughout the ages. God sovereignly permits His people to suffer in order to silence Satan's wagging tongue. Indeed the elect *must* suffer in order that God's claim to have secured through the work of His Son a people that are His very own might be vindicated by means of the elects' persevering faith in tribulation.

Through your patient endurance in suffering, God is achieving a mighty triumph over the Adversary. The seed of the woman referred to in the mother promise of Gen. 3:15 has two interconnected referents. On one level, as Paul argues in Gal. 3:16, it refers to the individual Seed, the Messiah. But on another level, as Paul argues later in the same chapter, verse 29, it refers to the collective seed, the elect who are united to Christ. Thus, the Gen. 3:15 promise that God is going to crush the Serpent's head is fulfilled not only through Christ's redemptive work - in His fulfillment of the Law, His accursed death upon the cross, and in His victorious resurrection and exaltation - but also through the suffering of Christ's body. Those who by sovereign grace are enabled to persevere in spite of the loss of all things in this life are participants in Christ's sufferings and, hence, also in His victory over Satan.

God is demonstrating the power of redemption to take out of the fallen mass of the seed of the Serpent a redeemed people who serve God for no earthly reward, but only because by grace they can truly say, "Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is none upon earth that I desire beside You" (Ps. 73:25).

The greatest temptation in suffering is to question whether God still loves us. When we suffer, it is natural to wallow in self pity, to become curved in upon ourselves, as we bemoan our condition. Even though by grace he was brought to his senses at the end, Job also fell into this sin of self-pity. How did God recover him from this state of self-oriented doubt? Through suffering. Job's tribulations were a means of grace for him. It was suffering that caused him to abandon any hope of finding his reward in this passing evil age and taught him to look ahead to the dawning of a new age, even the last days inaugurated by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. For in his darkest hour, Job was enabled to say by faith:

"I know that my Redeemer lives,

and He shall stand at the latter day upon the earth;  
and after my skin is destroyed, this I know,  
that in my flesh I shall see God" (Job 19:25-26)

Only because of this fixed hope in the resurrection was Job enabled to repent in dust and ashes before the God, even while lying destitute in rags and the smell of his rotting flesh!

If Job, living in the pre-Messianic era of type and shadow, was able to take up his cross, forsake the world and its offer of earthly advancement, and follow Christ in the hope of a better resurrection, how much more shall we who live now in the last days inaugurated by the resurrection of Christ? Job, from the limited perspective of the earthly scene, knew little of the spiritual warfare transpiring in the heavenly council, and yet he was enabled to trust in the promise of a heavenly reward. How much more must we who have had the heavenly realm opened up to us by the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ that we might see the victory achieved for us by our suffering-but-now-glorified Forerunner who has passed within the veil?

You who trust in Jesus Christ alone, you who are suffering as pilgrims at the end of the ages, look away from the limited perspective of your earthly life, and gaze in faith upon the heavenly perspective afforded by the panoramic sweep of redemptive history! Look away from yourself to Jesus Christ! Jesus Christ is the greater Job. And you are united to this One-greater-than-Job. By effectual calling, you are a trophy of divine grace, for God has caused you to do what no man can do apart from grace - to place your hope fully in the heavenly reward while yet stripped of all things in this life.

You who continue to confess Christ in the midst of suffering, who with Job look ahead by faith to the hope of the resurrection at the second coming of Jesus Christ, *you* are God's triumphant answer to the Devil's slander. May the God of peace crush Satan under your feet shortly.