

Distress of Job - Part 1

by W.F. Anderson

The sermon explores the profound suffering of Job, emphasizing the importance of maintaining faith and integrity amidst life's trials without clear explanations.

Duration: 34:39

Scripture: Job 1:6-12, Matthew 6:33

Topics: "Gods Sovereignty", "Faith Crisis"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the limited knowledge and understanding that humans have in the grand scheme of God's sovereignty. He uses the analogy of actors on a stage, emphasizing that we only have a limited perspective of the scenes that have come before and will come after our own. The speaker also references C.S. Lewis' depiction of the second coming of Jesus as a sudden and unexpected event. Additionally, the speaker mentions a theology class discussion on the illustration of the potter and the clay in Romans 9, highlighting the inability of the potter to communicate his intentions to the clay. The sermon concludes by emphasizing that Job's true problem was not the loss of his possessions, family, or health, but rather the loss of his connection with God.

Transcript

There's certain people here from Detroit and other points, those who were in Lake Geneva last year, you are free to go to sleep right now. There was a man in the land of Oz whose name was Job, and that man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil. Verse six, Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them.

The Lord said to Satan, Whence have you come? Satan answered the Lord, From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on earth. The Lord said to Satan, 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? Then Satan answered the Lord, Does Job fear God for naught? Hath thou not put a headship out of him in his house, and all that he hath on every side? Thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But put forth thy hand now, and touch all that he hath, and he will curse thee to thy face.

And the Lord said to Satan, Behold, all that he hath is in your power. Only upon himself do not put forth your hand. So Satan went forth in the presence of the Lord.

And then Satan comes a second time after the affliction that he visited upon Job, of which all that are aware. Verse 3 of chapter 2. The Lord said to Satan, 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, though you moved me against him to destroy him without cause. Then Satan answered the Lord skin for skin.

All that a man has will he give for his life. But put forth thy hand now, and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse thee to thy face. And the Lord said to Satan, Behold, he is in your power.

Only spare his life. Now chapter 42. Verse 7. Chapter 42 in verse 7. After the Lord had spoken these words to Job, the Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite, My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends.

For you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. Now therefore take seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and offer up for yourselves a burnt offering. And my servant Job shall pray for you.

For I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly. For you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. So Eliphaz the Temanite and Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite went and did what the Lord had told them.

And the Lord accepted Job's prayer. And the Lord restored the fortunes of Job when he had prayed for his friends. And the Lord gave back to Job twice as much as he had before.

Thomas Carlyle, the English writer, has said that this is one of the most magnificent pieces of literature that's ever been written. And I think it's generally recognized as a great piece of dramatic literature that our Eucharist Synod is not literary, but personal. The Book of Job explores the whole problem of suffering and suffering on the part of the righteous.

And I shouldn't say it really explores this, it doesn't explain it, but it gives us an example. And if we turn to the Book of Psalms, because of varied experiences in our own lives that we find paralleled in the Psalmist, in deep distress, we invariably turn to the Book of Job. Not because we get answers, because we don't get answers in the Book of Job, but because we feel a kinship to this man.

That's why we turn to the Book of Job. And we realize that we do not realize among our contemporaries, we realize that among our spiritual ancestors, there are people who have suffered as some of us have to suffer in our own lifetime. And it's the second thing that we realize, that God has not singled us out to toy with us as a cat toys with a mouse before he destroys us.

God is not dealing with us like that. There are no answers to Job in this book. He is never told why he had to go through the devastating suffering that he went through.

That says a great deal to me about our own suffering as we go through distress. But perhaps we should have time to look at that. Job, as we recognize from the prologue, this prose prologue of the first two chapters, is an exceedingly wealthy man, one of the wealthiest men in the Near East, and one of the most revered and respected, if you go back to his own defense in chapters 30 and 31, or maybe about chapter 29, and he talks about the great reverences with which he was held, even among the elders.

And because of that, I shouldn't say because of that, but that was a basic premise, presupposition on which Job lived, and which his friends lived, and that is that the righteous always prosper, and that Job's prosperity was directly related to his righteousness. That was one of the basic presuppositions by which they lived. That presupposition was preceded by another one, by the way, and that is that God is absolutely righteous and will never do what is wrong.

And then there was a third presupposition on which they lived, and that is that God causes everything that happens. Now, when you put two of those presuppositions together, that God is righteous and will never do what is wrong, and secondly, that God causes everything that happens, you are bound to come out with a third one. That prosperity is the direct action of God in response to the righteousness of a human being, because God is right, and God does everything that happens in a man's life.

And that if a man suffers, it's because he has sinned. God would never cause a righteous man to suffer, because God always does what is right, and everything that happens is caused by God. One of those presuppositions is true, and the other two are false, and yet they live by all three.

The only one of those three presuppositions that is correct is that God is right and will never do what is wrong. The presupposition that God causes everything that happens is wrong. The presupposition that prosperity in life is due to a man's righteousness, it's God's reward, and suffering is God's punishment, that presupposition is wrong.

But their lives were founded on those three presuppositions, two of which were wrong. God does not cause everything that happens. That's obvious on the surface of it.

Sin happens. Does God cause that? It's blasphemous to think so. No, God does not cause everything that happens.

And that idea got Job and his friends into all kinds of difficulties in what was going on. But you remember Job's sufferings. The terrible devastation that came upon him in one day, and then his own personal illness.

I don't know how we could parallel that, except perhaps in times of war, mass bombings of British and German cities in World War II. It may be in some of those devastated cities, a husband and father was the only one that escaped from the rubble of his home, and he had to turn around and see that his wife and his family and all his possessions had been wiped out in that night bombing raid. And then if he were to discover a week later that he had an incurable cancer, we might have some sort of a parallel to Job.

If that cancer were very slow-acting, not a rapid cancer, then we would have something parallel to Job. The problem with Job's disease is it wouldn't kill him quickly. But if you could think of a situation like that, you would have Job's situation.

Let me say here that, lest I forget it, there was one thing that Satan was trying to do in this man's life, and that was destroy his confidence in God. And if you've never been in a situation where you begin to question the reality of God's goodness, and whether or not it really is worthwhile to put your trust in God, you have no understanding of Job's dilemma. But that's what Satan was trying to do.

Satan had certain assumptions on which he was operating. He assumed that Job's life was wrapped up in his possessions and in his children, and that God was an auxiliary to Job's prosperity and his family, and that if he destroyed Job's possessions and Job's family, he would have destroyed Job. His other

assumption was that if that didn't work, Job's life centered around his own personal well-being.

And if he could destroy that, he would destroy the center of Job's life. God's challenge was that the center of Job's life was God himself. But Satan felt that if he could destroy Job's possessions and his family and his health, Job would give up his faith in God.

And as I read through the scriptures, this is exactly what Satan was trying to do. Satan does not operate in what we call the moral realm of life, though I think we restrict that term far too narrowly. But the gross sins of the flesh, that's not the area where Satan is operating.

He's operating in a much more difficult area than that. Once you begin to see the biblical priorities, as C.S. Lewis says, you realize that those gross sins of the flesh are mere flea bites compared to the real sins. And what Satan is working at is to kill our confidence in God, to destroy our confidence in God either through our circumstances or through our own sin, as in the case of Peter.

Satan has desired to have all of you, that he may sift you as wheat, but I have prayed for you, singular Peter, that your faith fail not. Whereas in the case of the Apostle Paul, that thorn in the flesh, he describes as a messenger of Satan. A messenger is one who delivers a message, and that thorn in the flesh was delivering a message to Paul.

You might as well give up. It's not worthwhile to serve Jesus Christ when this is what happens to you. That's the area in which Satan operates, to destroy our confidence in the living God, and that's what he was trying to do here.

So, I want to talk a little bit about Job's suffering, first of all. And one of the reasons I've read part of this prose prologue is to indicate very, very clearly there was no reason in Job for that suffering. And I am distressed by the number of commentaries on Job that I read that say, God knew that Job was a proud man, and he had to humble Job through this suffering.

That's false. That's false. God, in the record of Scripture itself, three times, twice to Satan, and once in the description of Job, says that he's an upright man, he is blameless, he turns away from evil.

That's God's witness to this man. And then on the fourth occasion, to Satan, Job says, You moved me against him without cause. There isn't any reason in Job why he suffers like this.

And we are going to misread the book of Job if we come to it with that idea, and we are going to misread our own lives and the lives of other people, and judge other people if we come to the book of Job with the idea that Job was a proud man whom God had to humble. He was not. And even at the end, and that's why I read from the 42nd chapter, when it was all over, when there were things of which Job had to repent, things that he said, God said to those three friends, You have not spoken of me what is right as my servant Job has.

There was not any reason in Job why he should suffer that way. Let me beg of you, as you work with fellow Christians who are in deep distress, do not start assigning moral causes. If there is a moral cause, let it be between that individual and God.

We are not God. We are not the judges of our brothers and sisters. Secondly, as far as Job's suffering is concerned, no explanation was ever given to Job.

We know from the prose prologue what was going on. Job never read the prose prologue to this book. He was the chief actor in the play, and he hadn't read the whole play.

He never knew, and God never explained to him why he had suffered so. I had the privilege of sitting under Dr. Kenneth Conslor, who is now dean of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School up in Deerfield, Illinois. I remember once in our theology class, as we discussed the doctrine of God, particularly some of the attributes of God, we got into Romans chapter 9. He was taking the illustration that Paul uses there of the potter and the clay.

One of the things he got out of it, being the kind of tender-hearted man that he is, is that as the potter fashions the clay, there is no way that the potter can communicate to the clay what he's doing. How does a human being tell a lump of clay what he's doing? He can't do it. And as God works in our lives, very often there isn't any way that he can explain to us what's going on.

We understand something of the conflict between Satan and God. We got the whole Bible. Suppose God had tried to tell Job what was going on.

Would it have helped Job to understand? Wouldn't have helped me any. I'd have told God, go pick some other battlefield. Maybe you've got a conflict with Satan.

Go fight it out in Heaven. Don't choose me. That wouldn't help me a bit.

And there isn't any way that the potter can tell the clay what he's doing. At that point, everything depends on whether or not we trust the potter. And Job never got an explanation.

Thirdly, there were causes far greater than Job's own life and what was going on. The issue was not Job, nor Job's integrity, though that's the question Satan raised. The real issue was God's integrity.

And Satan had made the bald accusation against God that the only way he could get followers on this earth was to bribe them. The only reason you can get a human being who you've made in your own image and after your own likeness to follow you is you've got to put a hedge around him and make him prosperous, and what you're doing is bribing his obedience. And that's the kind of God you are.

And there were far bigger questions in this than Job's own life, and Job knew nothing about that. And there was no way God could tell Job about that. One of the figures that C.S. Lewis used as one of the pictures to try to help us see some of this, particularly as he talks about the second advent of our Lord Jesus, and by the way, I strongly urge you to get his little book called *The World's Last Night*, and also his little book called *The Weight of Glory*.

But as he talks about the world's last night, the sudden, unexpected coming of our Lord Jesus, he pictures us as actors in a scene in a play. We have our own lines to read. Now, don't misread his picture and put into that some non-biblical view of the sovereignty of God.

What he's trying to get at is we are in one little scene. We know what's going on while we are on the stage, a little bit of it, not all of it. We don't know all the lines the other actors have.

We're aware of some of those lines, and we get into the same bit of action on the stage with others. We know very, very little of the scenes that have preceded ours, and we know very, very little, if anything, of the scenes that are going to follow ours. It may be that right in the middle of our scene, the author is going

to ring down the curtain on the play.

We do not know the whole play, the whole drama. It's our responsibility to play our part well without knowing the whole drama. Job did not know the whole drama.

He knew nothing of the scene that was being played in heaven. He was acutely aware of the scene in which he was an actor, but he knew nothing of the scene that was being played in hell. We do not know the whole drama.

And from that, I want to talk a little bit about suffering in general, as far as the Christian is concerned. I suggested to you already, as we talked about Hagar, that we simply share the common lot of all mankind, and there are no exceptions for the godly. If you think there are, you are taking Satan's position, not God's, and you are taking the position of the friends of Job who were such an affliction to him.

You are not taking God's position. That was the basic premise of Job's friends, that the godly are exempt from that kind of suffering. And they were no help to Job.

They were part of his problem. The godly are not exempt from that suffering. I want to say a second thing about suffering in general.

God is not primarily concerned about whether or not we are happy. What he is concerned about is that we be good. God really doesn't care whether we're happy or not.

That's of no real interest to him. What he is concerned about is that we be good. And I mean good in that noble and righteous sense in which the word is used primarily in the New Testament.

That's God's concern. And if it takes unhappiness to make us good, God is perfectly willing to sacrifice our happiness to make us good. It's obvious he was willing to sacrifice his own happiness to make us good.

Why should he hesitate to sacrifice ours? Any parent realizes that. How do you feel about parents who always give in to their children's demand to be happy, that they should never experience pain or displeasure? How do you feel about parents who, when their child lies on the floor and throws a tantrum, give the child whatever he's asking for so that he won't be unhappy? What do you say? You say that parent really doesn't love that child. God as our Heavenly Father loves us too much to let us be happy at the expense of being good.

And he will not exempt us from suffering just to keep us happy. And I like, and I do not like, C.S. Lewis' expression that God is determined to make us like his son, regardless of the cost to him or to us. So God is not really concerned about whether or not we're happy.

And neither will we a million years into eternity. Whether or not we were happy on Earth will be of no concern to us. So I'm trying to get away from the idea that all suffering in life is penal.

It isn't. By the way, that's the position Job's friends took, and I'd love to talk about those three men and what they said about Job. But as you read Job's defense in chapter 31, you discover that some of the sins of which they were accusing him in the first, and I haven't even got time to outline this book to show you the three cycles of speeches in which they went.

Any good commentary will do that. Job has to defend himself against what we call the sins of the flesh. They're the kinds of sins that a man of wealth and power in the Near East could commit.

Just as I was talking about Abram with Hagar. Poor Hagar, who had no right. A man of great wealth and power could take any woman he wanted.

Who's going to stop him? The most powerful chepton in the East, who's going to stop him? Could that girl's father stand up against a man of Job's wealth and power? Could she? Could any other man? No. And so, these friends assume that because of his wealth and power, those are the sins of which Job has been guilty. Job indignantly defends himself against the accusation.

But I thought, too, we are so much like Job's friends. We are so concerned about what we call the grosser sins of the flesh than the really delicious sins of the spirit we pass over. The devastating sins are not the sins of the flesh, but the sins of the spirit.

You recognize that in the scriptures, too. The sins of the flesh may make us like animals, rucking around and mating feasts. But the sins of the spirit make us devils.

And it's worse to be a devil than an animal. It's better, of course, to be neither. But the sins of the spirit are always far more devastating than the sins of the flesh.

But that's what they were saying, too, if you're being punished for your sins, that he was not. The other thing I would like to say about suffering, and there are many more things that one could say, but the other thing I would like to say about suffering is this. Do not confuse results with purpose.

Because God brings good results out of some suffering does not mean that's the purpose for the suffering. And if I cannot distinguish between results and purpose, I'm in trouble. It's simply characteristic of God to get into an evil situation and bring good out of it, as he did with our sin, for instance.

But to say that God purposed sin in order that he might bring salvation and show his grace in Jesus Christ is to fall into the trap of which Paul indignantly talks when he says, let us do evil, let us sin, the great may abound. That's wicked to say something like that. And to say that God brought sin into the world to display his grace is wicked.

We have confused results with purpose, and it's simply characteristic of God to get into an evil situation and bring good out of it. But that result is not the same thing as purpose. That is why it happens.

And to look at what Job learned from this experience is not the same thing as saying that's why God brought it into his life. And God didn't bring it, by the way, he let Satan do it. He permitted it.

But to see the good that comes out of it is not the same thing as saying that's the purpose of it. Do not confuse results with purpose. I magnify the grace of God when I see the results.

I twist the grace of God when I say that there's a purpose. I should also talk about Job's real problems. How am I going to get all this done? Maybe I'll have to pick up Job at another session and finish this thing.

Job's real problem, as you read through this book and what he has to say, and particularly as he begins it in chapter three, Job's real problem was not the loss of his possessions, nor the loss of his family, nor the loss of his health. His real problem was the loss of God. There is no reason for him to say in chapter three what he says when he clutches the day of his birth and the moment of his conception.

If the real problem was the loss of his family and friends, when your loved ones die, if you've had a happy life, you can always look back on those pleasant memories, and you thank God for that. The loss of them

does not make you wish you were never born, and if you end life in a diseased condition, you can look back to all those years of health that you had. That doesn't make you say, I wish I'd never been born.

The problem was the loss of God, because Job worked from that basic presupposition, God causes everything, and that illness and loss are the consequence of sin, they're God's punishment. And what Job felt at first was that God had turned against him, but Job knew, though he was not sinless, there was no reason in Job for God to do that. That wasn't pride, that was Job just being realistic.

And what he felt was that God had arbitrarily turned against him, and if the Psalms had been listened, Job would have understood that 22nd Psalm, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? That's Job's problem, because that struck at the heart of his life. The heart of Job's life was not his family, not his possessions. The heart of Job's life was God, and when God seemingly could arbitrarily leave him and forsake him, Job's whole life was shattered, and it would have been better for him never to have been born than to end up life without God.

Now, that's a biblical idea. Better for that man, Jesus said, if he had never been born. That's what Job thought.

Let me say one thing about that. It really wasn't true. God was not arbitrary, and God had not forsaken Job.

Job felt that he had, and he acted as though God had, but God hadn't. Now, let's distinguish something else. We must distinguish between the presence of God and the sense of God's presence.

Whether or not we have the sense of God's presence isn't important. Oh, we like it, but it's not important. The important thing is to know that God is there.

Whether I sense his presence or not isn't important. If God gives us that sense, fine, but let's not build on the sense of it. What we build on is his promise never to leave us nor forsake us, and if we build our lives on the sense of his presence, we're going to be in trouble.

And that's what Job had to work through. That while he did not have the sense of God's presence, what he discovered at the end of the book is that he had always had the presence of God. God had not forsaken him, even though Job felt that way.

Now, perhaps some of you don't understand anything about that. Some of you will. Some of you have used Psalm 22-1 in your prayers at times in your life, haven't you? Sure, some of us have been there.

But he hasn't left us. No matter how devastating the circumstances in our life may be, no matter how much it may seem we have lost the sense of God's presence, we have not lost God's presence. He is there.

Not only will he not forsake us, that is, abandon us permanently, he will not even temporarily leave us. I will never leave you, nor forsake you. And he is there.

In the end, that's all Job needed. And that's all he wanted. That's it.

To the breath, O God, from shallow thoughts of yourself, and shallow conclusions about life, and shallow thoughts about our relationship to you, help us in the hours of great suffering and loss to stand on the bedrock of your promise when all our sinful perceptions fail to come true. Your promise never to leave us, nor to forsake us. We pray in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

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