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There was a Man Named Job

Job 1:1-22

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Note: Read Job 1:1-22 before continuing.

I want to switch gears this morning. For the last month, since we've been feeling the hardships of our government's response to a pandemic and many are living with fear either for their health or for the future fallout of the measures taken to stem the virus's tide, I've set aside our study of the book of Exodus. In his providence and through the lectionary, the Lord has given us some timely passages of scripture for these days, but as our situation continues, I think it's better to let God's word speak to us more systematically through the exposition of a book rather than trying to find ways to apply the lectionary readings. Of course, the book of Job comes immediately to mind. Job knew suffering the likes of which none of us has ever known. And so for the next few months I'd like for us to look at this beautiful, difficult, and humbling book from the Old Testament's library of wisdom literature.

As I said, it's a difficult book. In the mid-17th Century, Joseph Caryl, a Congregationalist minister in London, preached two-hundred-and-forty-something sermons on the book of Job over a period of twenty-four years. That's a *lot* of study in the book of Job. And even he, in his last sermon, apologised to his congregation, saying, "I have not attained so clear an understanding of some passages." "What am I to do?" I thought. The good news is that the emphasis of my master's degree was on Old Testament wisdom literature and that I studied under Bruce Waltke, one of the best. The bad news is that I spent most of my time studying Sirach (or you might know it as Ecclesiasticus) in the Apocrypha and that that was twenty-five

years ago. I've jumped into a crash-course refresher the last couple of weeks and I pray that the Holy Spirit will speak as we dig into this book he's given us.

So Job. Who, what, why, where, when? I think the best place to start is with the first verse:

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

We don't know exactly where the "land of Uz" was other than that it was somewhere east of the Jordan River—to the east of Israel. It could have been anywhere from Syria, east of the Sea of Galilee in the north, to the Arabian desert in the south. The east was known for its wisdom, which according to the book of Kings, rivalled the wisdom of Solomon. It was from the "east" that the wise men came to worship Jesus. And so it's appropriate that this wise man named Job comes from the east as well. We should note that he is not an Israelite. The book of Job does not address it's questions from the standpoint of God's covenant with Israel. It's application is wider and more general—and more individually focused.

The text says "there was a man". Was there a real Job? Or is Job a literary construct? Was he a folk hero renowned for his wisdom around which our story was later written? We don't know. Those words "there was a man" are sometime used in the Bible to introduce parables and other times real history. The book itself, many scholars think, may be one of the oldest in the Bible. The Hebrew in which it is written is unusual and different from the rest of the Old Testament. In fact, it's different enough that translating the book is difficult and the meaning of roughly three per cent of it is uncertain—although that doesn't mean we can't understand the meaning of the book itself. The book has a prose introduction that sets the scene and a prose epilogue that closes out the story, but the heart of the book is forty chapters of some of the most eloquent, sophisticated, and sublime poetry in

scripture. The scenes in heaven, given in the first two chapters, would have never been known by any human—let alone Job and his friends—and despite the knowledge and wit of the players, no one would have discoursed the way they do in the grand poetry used in the heart of the book. I'm inclined towards the conclusion that the book of Job is—like a lot of other ancient wisdom literature—fiction. It's an exploration into the justice and wisdom of the Lord through a hypothetical dialogue between five wise men debating the subject amongst themselves with a prologue which gives, us the readers, the setting needed to understand the story's big picture. It may be that there was a real Job, known for both his righteousness and for experiencing great suffering, who was put at the centre of this thought experiment. At the end of the day we don't know. But we don't need to. All we need to know is that the Spirit has inspired and given us this book to help the Lord's people in every age find their way through difficult times and to trust in the Lord's wise governance of the world.

The key thing about Job is that he was *blameless* and *upright* and *he feared God*. Now, that doesn't mean he was perfect. These are words that the book of Proverbs uses to describe men and women who are favoured by God. The sense is that Job was a godly man and that he was characterised by integrity. Not only that, but he's wise. The heart of biblical wisdom is the fear of the Lord. Now, except in his initial response to tragedy given in the prose prologue, Job as a non-Israelite never names God by his covenant name, but he nevertheless fears the Lord. And he certainly knew God's blessing. He had seven sons and three daughters, 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, 500 donkeys, and many servants. He was, says verse 3, "the greatest of all the people of the east". All of these numbers point to idealisations, to perfection. Not only is job a man known for his righteousness and integrity, but he's also the man who has everything. As is noted later, he's known in the city gate—he's got civic status as well. Everyone knows Job, which will make his fall all the more humbling.

Now, in verses 4 and 5 we're told that Job's sons "each on his day" would hold a feast in his home and that all the siblings would gather. The general consensus seems to be that these were probably birthday parties of some kind. Whatever the case, we're told that when these

...days of the feast had run their course, Job would send and consecrate them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all. For Job said, "It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts." Thus Job did continually.

We have no sense that Job's children were hellions running wild or anything like that. There's no reason to think they were any less pious than Job. What this *seems*, I think, to be getting at is that for all his wisdom and integrity, Job's understanding of God *may* be flawed. The gods of the Ancient Near East were often petty, arbitrary, and easily offended and their worshippers often went out of their way in attempts to appease them lest they fall out of favour. Is that what Job's doing here? Is he approaching the Lord the way the pagans approached their gods? We see him making sacrifices on behalf of his children in case they've done something wrong—making sacrifices on their behalf lest they fall out of God's favour. Job expresses this fear about God later in his speeches and I think that explains his actions here. And this is the weak spot in Job's faith, in his piety, in his wisdom. And the Adversary will exploit it. Is Job righteous because he values righteousness, is he serving God because he loves God, or is he—at least some of the time—going through the motions and treating God like a vending machine, being righteous merely to ensure God's continued blessing. This is the flaw in Job's righteousness that causes the Adversary to question the Lord's policies.

Now let's look at that. We've met Job and now the narrator of the story shifts scenes to the Lord's council chamber.

In verse 6 we see the Lord holding court and his council members or cabinet ministers—what the text calls the "sons of God"—are summoned. And amongst them is one called the Adversary or the Challenger. In Hebrew it's *the satan*. It's not a proper name. Hebrew doesn't use the definite article with proper names. It's a title given to one of these heavenly councillors or ministers. There's not enough information given here, or for that matter in the Old Testament as whole, to develop a dogmatic explanation of this character. The Hebrew word *satan* can be both a verb or a noun—referring to some kind of opposition or to a character involved in some kind of adversarial work—but always either at God's direction or subject to his sovereignty. I'm inclined to see this character's role as something like that of the opposition in Parliament. They're there to push back, to challenge, to question, and to act as a check on the government. That's their job. In fact, how do we refer to them? As "Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition". They're not there to challenge the sovereignty of the Queen, but to help ensure the Queen's government is on the right track. And that seems to be something of the role of the Adversary or Challenger here in the Lord's court and it will get at the core theme and purpose of the book. There doesn't seem to be anything here to indicate this character is diabolical or has evil intentions. To come to that conclusion, we have to import it from outside the text.

The Lord calls on the Adversary and asks him, "Where have you been? What have you been up to?" And the Adversary responds, "I've been 'going to and fro on the earth, and...walking up and down on it'" (v. 7). "Ah!" says the Lord, "then you must have run across Job, my most devoted servant!":

"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?" (Job 1:8)

Yes, the Adversary does know about Job. And he knows, that Job is indeed upright and blameless and that he really

does fear God. There's no question about that. But! But what if it's not what Job does that's the problem? What if Job's motivations are wrong. The Adversary responds to the Lord:

"Does Job fear God for no reason? Have you not put a hedge around 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 stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face." (Job 1:9b-11)

Here's what the book of Job is about. Ultimately, it's not Job who is on trial, but the Lord's policy, the way he chooses to govern his Creation. You see, the book of Job is aimed at a problem that Israel struggled with. And it's not just Israel. Each generation of the Lord's people seems to struggle with this issue in one way or another. It's something that theologians and biblical scholars call the Retribution Principle. The basic affirmation is that God blesses righteousness and punishes wickedness. Now, the Retribution Principle obviously isn't wrong. God *does* bless righteousness and he *does* punish wickedness. But if we leave it at that, the formula becomes overly simplistic. And in this overly-simplistic form, the Retribution Principle leaves in question the motives of the people God blesses. As the Adversary asks of Job: What if Job is only being righteous for his own benefit? What if Job is only serving the Lord because the Lord has blessed him? Is Job really devoted to the Lord in his heart, or is he just in it for himself? If he's in it for the stuff he gets from God, well, isn't his righteousness actually unrighteousness? And if his righteousness is really unrighteousness, is the Lord just in continuing to bless him?" The Adversary is perfectly aware that the Lord rewards righteousness and punishes wickedness and he challenges that policy. "What if it gives people the wrong motive for serving the Lord?" he asks.

And, of course, as we'll see when Job's friends arrive and the great dialogue begins, if we know it's true that God

blesses the righteous and punishes the wicked, is it then also true that a blessed person is righteous and a suffering person unrighteous? Think of the disciples in John 9. This is the principle they were working from when they asked Jesus about the man born blind. “Who sinned,” they asked, “this man or his parents.” The assumption was that because the man was blind, *someone* must have sinned and the blindness was the punishment. And Jesus didn’t answer their question directly, because it wasn’t the right question in the first place. He said to them, “It’s not because he sinned, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.” There’s more to it than a simple formula about righteousness being blessed and wickedness being punished. Yes, as a general principle, God blesses the righteous and punishes the wicked and in a perfect world this might be all we need to understand. But the world isn’t perfect. We’ve broken it. God will set it to rights one day, but in the meantime that means that there are complicating and mitigating factors in God’s governance of his creation as he brings things to that ultimate goal.

This is how the dialogue between Job and his friends unfolds. They all assume that the Lord’s actions can be explained with this simplistic model. They all also all begin with the assumption that God is just. And so Job’s three friends argue that if the Retribution Principle explains God’s actions and that if God is truly just, which he must be, then Job’s righteousness is called into question. And so they hector Job: “We know that to all outward appearances, you’re a beacon of righteousness. But, Job, you’ve got to be hiding some secret sin. Confess it, repent of it, and all will be well with you again.” Job, for his part, is just as sure that the Retribution Principle is just. But Job also knows that he is indeed righteous. He has no secret sins to confess. And so the only thing left to him is to question whether God is truly just after all. Elihu, the fourth disputant, arrives in the second half of the book and, in his wisdom, gets a little closer to resolution. He changes the terms of the debate a bit. What if

God is afflicting Job not for something he’s done in the past, but for what he’s doing right now. What if this affliction is meant not to punish, but to correct or something like that.

It’s not until the four have finished their disputation that the Lord enters in a whirlwind and we find that justice isn’t the aspect of the Lord’s character in question here. They’ve been asking the wrong question all along. The problem is that human beings, with our limited scope, have inadequate knowledge and *wisdom* to evaluate the justice of the Lord’s actions. To do so is to repeat the sin of Adam and Eve when they tried to take God’s role on themselves. No, the real issue is the *wisdom* of God, which informs his justice. We can’t hold God to our standard of justice, because our standard of justice is limited and imperfect—we lack his wisdom. Rather, we have to understand that justice flows from God himself according to his perfect and infinite wisdom. And so the book of Job becomes a call to faith in the midst of suffering and tragedy. The book of Job is a call to give up our persistent attempts to take God’s role on ourselves, our persistent attempts to judge him from our limited perspective, and to put our trust in his perfect goodness and wisdom.

So Job isn’t the one on trial. The Adversary has called into question the Lord’s policy. That’s what’s on trial. And so the Lord, in verse 12, hands Job over to the Adversary, “All that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand.”

In the verses that follow a string of messengers comes running to Job with news of tragedy. First it’s a hoard of Sabean raiders who have stolen Job’s cattle and killed his servants. Then it’s word that “the fire of God from heaven”—probably a lightning storm—has fallen on the sheep and the servants tending them, killing them all. Third, Chaldeans have raided Job’s camels, stealing them all and killing their keepers. Just like *that* the incredible wealth of Job is wiped out. And last and worst of all, a messenger brings word

that a great wind—perhaps a tornado—hit the house where his seven sons and three daughters were feasting, knocking it flat and killing everyone inside.

Everything that Job had, his material wealth and his beloved children, are taken away just like *that*. He has nothing left. In verse 20 we’re told that:

Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped.

Tearing one’s robe was a universal act of anguish and mourning. So was shaving the head in many cultures—although this again tells us that Job is not an Israelite as shaving the head was forbidden to Israelite men. Job is in anguish. The ESV says that he worshipped, but the Hebrew literally says he prostrated himself. If we look at how this word is used this way in the Old Testament, it’s not so much as act of worship as it is an act of acknowledgement and acceptance of what God has done. Job humbles himself before the Lord. And he speaks. Look at verse 21:

“Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.”

Despite what has happened, Job maintains his faith in the justice and goodness of God. It’s interesting and says something of Job’s belief in the sovereignty of God that he doesn’t curse the desert raiders who stole his livestock and killed his servants. He doesn’t curse the king’s men who should have been protecting the borders of the land from lawless men. He doesn’t curse the lightning or the tornado. He acknowledges that God holds all these things in his hands, just as it was the Lord who prospered his business and his family. The Lord gave. The Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord. The Lord’s policy is vindicated in this first test. Job has lost the material blessings the Lord had given and still he maintains his righteousness, still he holds onto his faith, still he trusts in the

Lord. The narrator closes the chapter with the words:

In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong. (Job 1:22)

The Adversary had challenged the Lord saying that Job would curse him if his blessings were reversed. There's a clever word play at work in the Hebrew. The Adversary uses the word "bless" either ironically or euphemistically to mean the opposite. And so as Job blessed the Lord, he does exactly what the Adversary said he would do while simultaneously vindicating the Lord's actions. In the midst of incredible tragedy, Job acknowledges the Lord at work and blesses him. Now, that's not to say that Job did this easily. It might look that way if this is where the story ended, but there's more to come. Job knows that it's a lot harder to bless the Lord when he takes than when he gives. And because Job has affirmed the sovereignty of God, he will find himself wrestling deeply with doubt about the justice and equity of God. Nevertheless, he maintains his integrity and the Lord is—so far—vindicated.

Brothers and Sisters, this is the point of the book of Job. The book wrestles with the issue of faith. In the end, the book isn't really about Job. It's about the Lord and his just, good, and wise rule. And in that it's a call to faith. This opening scene is important. These are events Job will never know of, but we're given this glimpse into the Lord's council chamber so that we understand: Despite the role of the Adversary, it was the Lord who initiated all this when he brought Job to the Adversary's attention and it's the Lord who approved of all that will happen to poor Job. There's no easy out here. We can't just blame suffering on some evil power outside of the Lord's control. To conclude that Job is about a man who suffered because of a bet between God and the devil is to miss the point entirely. The book of Job is a call to think well of the Lord even in the face of tragedy and suffering, not so much because Job's faith serves as an example to us, but because, as we'll see, the Lord is wise. Job calls us to look beyond the issue of justice—again, a

category we are too limited and finite to judge—and to trust in the wisdom of our good and loving Creator even when that wisdom is beyond our understanding.

This was, I am sure, a difficult thing for Job to grasp. It took the Lord coming to him in a whirlwind and revealing his majesty. Brothers and Sisters, it's still to this day a difficult thing for us to grasp, but we have a great advantage over Job. The Lord came to Job in a whirlwind, declaring his power and might and sovereignty over Creation. But to us he has come in the person of Jesus, his own Son, who has humbled himself and taken on our flesh. He has come to us in Jesus, who knew no sin, yet was humbled again as he died on a cross. Job's loss points us to Jesus and the cross. Like Mary weeping at the foot of the cross, like the disciples grieving the empty tomb, thinking that Jesus' body had been stolen. We so often meet suffering with fear and with anger—sometimes even anger at the God whom we know is sovereign in this world. The death of Jesus was, to his friends, a horrible mystery. Why would God allow such a thing? And then came Easter and they met the risen Lord.

Jesus walked them through the scriptures, through the promises of God, and suddenly it all made sense. Suddenly the very worst day they had ever known became the greatest day in all of history, the day on which the righteousness of God was not only vindicated, but the righteousness of his people too. New creation had burst forth into the world that day, the source of life and hope for a world set to rights, a world where no one has to ask these questions anymore. Friends, it is no easy thing to trust the Lord—let alone bless him—in the midst of suffering, but the cross reveals his goodness, his wisdom, and his righteousness and so it is to the cross we must turn in the midst of our suffering. It is there we see the faithfulness of God and it is there that we find our faith renewed.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, give us insight as we study the story of Job and teach us, we pray, to trust you in the midst of our suffering. Teach us to focus our eyes on the cross of Jesus that

we might see everything—the world, our lives, the events and people that surround us—in light of your goodness, faithfulness, and wisdom revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Amen.