

Faith in the mist of suffering

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[0 : 00] thinking of a bishop, you know, who numbers don't bother me at all, but this particular bishop was coming to an English town, communicating with one of his vicars, and he wanted a big auditorium.

So he got the vicar to book the town hall, big cavernous auditorium there. But on the night when he came to speak, there's just not as many people there as there are here tonight.

And he leaned over to the vicar and said, did you not advertise the fact that I was coming? He says, oh no, bishop, but the words got around anyway.

I thought that was a good lesson to hold in mind. And we're going to, after we've sung again, after I've read, we're going to dip into the book of Job.

We're going to look at the beginning of the book and the end of the book. I'm going to read the first two chapters tonight for our reading.

[1 : 14] Interesting. Interesting. Thomas Carlyle, the great Thomas Carlyle, the Scot, said of the book of Job that it was the grandest, or it is the grandest thing ever written with a pen.

And Alfred Lord Tennyson, the former poet laureate, said that the book of Job is the greatest poem of ancient and modern times.

And it's one of my favorite books. It really is a tremendous account. So we're going to read the first two chapters completely, just to put us in the picture.

So chapter one of Job. In the land of Oz, there lived a man whose name was Job. This man was blameless and upright.

He feared God and shunned evil. He had seven sons and three daughters. And he owned 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, and 500 donkeys, and had a large number of servants.

[2 : 34] Job was the greatest man among all the people of the East. His sons used to take turns holding feasts in their homes.

And they would invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. When a period of feasting had run its course, Job would send and have them purified.

Early in the morning, he would sacrifice a burnt offering for each of them, thinking, perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts. This was Job's regular custom.

On one day, the angels came to present themselves before the Lord and Satan. He also came among them.

The Lord said to Satan, where have you come from? Satan answered the Lord from roaming through the earth and going to and fro in it.

[3 : 42] And the Lord said to Satan, have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him. He is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.

Does Job fear God for nothing? Satan replied, have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has?

You've blessed the work of his hands so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. But stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face.

The Lord said to Satan very well. Everything he possesses is in your hands, but on the man himself do not lay a finger.

Then Satan went out from the presence of the Lord. One day when Job's sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the house of the oldest brother, a messenger came to Job and said, the oxen were plowing and the donkeys were grazing nearby, and the Sabaeans attacked and carried them off.

[5 : 04] They put the servants to the sword, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you. While he was still speaking, another messenger came and said, the fire of God fell from the sky and

burned up the sheep and the servants, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you.

While he was still speaking, yet another messenger came and said, the Chaldeans formed three raiding parties and swept down on your camels and carried them off.

They put the servants to the sword, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you. While he was still speaking, yet another messenger came and said, your sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother's house, when suddenly a mighty wind swept in from the desert and struck the four corners of the house.

It collapsed on them, and they are dead, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you. At this, Job got up, tore his robe, and shaved his head.

Then he fell to the ground in worship and said, naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall depart.

[6 : 36] The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away. May the name of the Lord be praised. In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.

On another day, the angels came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came with them to present himself before the Lord. And the Lord said to Satan, where have you come from?

Satan answered the Lord from roaming through the earth and going to and fro in it. Then the Lord said to Satan, have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him.

He is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil, and he still maintains his integrity, though you incited me against him to ruin him without any reason.

Skin for skin, Satan replied, a man will give all he has for his own life, but stretch out your hand and strike his flesh and bones, and he will surely curse you to your face.

[7 : 49] The Lord said to Satan, very well then. Job is in your hands, but you must spare his life. So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord and afflicted Job with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the top of his head.

Then Job took a piece of broken pottery and scraped himself with it as he sat among the ashes. His wife said to him, are you still holding on to your integrity?

Curse God and die. He replied, you are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God and not trouble?

In all this, Job did not sin in what he said. When Job's three friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shu'ite, and Zophar the Naamathite, heard about all the troubles that had come upon Job, they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and comfort him.

When they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him. They began to weep aloud and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads.

[9 : 14] Then they sat on the ground with Job for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him because they saw how great his suffering was.

Great story. We're going to have a look at that one. We've sung our next hymn. He came to our orphanage in Romania having the name and face of an angel.

He was only four, though he looked younger than four. He was severely malnourished. He was only now learning to talk.

Why was that? Well, because no one had ever talked to him. His parents had kept him in a small cage like an animal and never allowed him to mix with other children.

He was regularly beaten by his alcoholic, feckless, heartless father. And Gabby had a metal plate in his leg, fractured during one of the severe beatings from his father.

[10 : 31] He had cigarette burns on various parts of his body. And at first, when he came into the orphanage, he was afraid of the children, the other children, and even of the gentle housemothers that served there.

He'd never known affection, ever. And that had been his life since arriving in this world. However, I'm glad to say he made steady progress in his new home, even slowly learning to talk and even smile as he was shown care and kindness and love for the first time in his brief existence.

He broke my heart. How could anyone hurt such a gentle, innocent, loving, beautiful wee boy?

You say, why, Lord, why? What sort of life had it been for this sad, vulnerable, defenseless might? How many more were like Gabby in Romania? His father was sentenced to ten years in prison for cruelty to this little boy.

[12:02] So removed from his parents, mercifully, he was placed in our home in the city of Arad. And, well, how do we get answers for that sort of happening in the world?

The book of Job helps. That's my suggestion. Now, in any congregation, even a congregation of this size, there are two kinds of people.

There are those who can say of their circumstances, as in Psalm 16 and verse 6, The boundaries have fallen for me in pleasant places.

Surely I have a beautiful inheritance. Things are good. Life is kind, comfortable, financially, domestically, professionally, socially.

The sun is shining. And that's where you are just now, some of you maybe. Praise the Lord. But the scenery can change without warning. James was right where he said in chapter 4, verse 14 of his letter, You don't know what tomorrow will bring.

[13:14] That's the first kind of circumstances, though, that I've described. That things can be good, but others may be saying, as in Psalm 42 and verse 3, Tears have been my food all day long.

Life is joyless. There's an unrelenting ache, a burden that cannot be shared, and someone in a captive situation from which there can be no escape.

Job could possibly be the oldest book in the world. I was reading. An account of a man who experienced both conditions, both extremes of perfect earthly happiness.

And then suddenly, well, we read what happened to him. He knew earthly bliss. The sun seemed to shine every day.

And the book opens, listing his enviable circumstances. Fabulous wealth. Universal respect. Prominent in society.

[14:27] He's included amongst the wise. People hang on to his every word. And they regularly sought his counsel. He was a man who was to be consulted.

And a man of wealth and wisdom and worship, who worshiped God from a clear conscience. And added to all that, he was a man of outstanding godliness.

Job's integrity is put beyond dispute by almighty God himself. God speaks well of him. You notice that.

So, riches, wisdom, status, respect, holiness and happiness. What a combination. Happily married with ten healthy children?

Who could ask for anything? It was all there. In favor with God and man in the earthly paradise of the land of Oz.

[15:29] And the Lord had built a hedge around him. Verse ten. You have always protected him and everything he owns. So, continued happiness seemed assured.

And God, who delights to have his people, holy, happy and prosperous, is well able to protect his own from pain and loss. Now, hold on to that about God.

He loves to have us happy. Ultimately, God will have all his people joyful. I often say to a congregation, the final emotion of God's people is joy.

C.S. Lewis, when at last he believed in God after a long time, a long process, he trusted in Christ and we are told he was, he called his autobiography surprised by joy.

The final condition of the redeemed people of God. The final condition of the redeemed people of God is perfect joy. Revelation 21 verse 4 says, God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

[16:36] There will be no more death, no mourning, no crying, no pain, for the former things have passed away. But as we follow the account that we read together, enter a character into this drama whose very goal is to inflict pain and destroy every last vestige of human joy if he can.

And this he does by driving a wedge between man and his creator. His goal is to separate them, to cause division.

In that, he has been universally successful. You and I have been separated from God by sin. Job's resistance to Satan's nefarious work caused the devil a great deal of irritation.

In verse 6, we are taken up to a higher realm. It's when there's a new departure. After the prosaic beginning, a veil is drawn, drawn aside, giving us a rare glimpse into the hidden and controlling factors of life on earth, of human experience.

You'll see what I mean. Somewhere in the universe, Satan stands to attention before the Lord and speaks only when he is bidden. He is granted access to the throne of God from where God's sovereign rule governs the affairs of the universe.

[18 : 11] The angels came, or the sons of God, is the literal translation. Satan was among them because he was a fallen angel. When summoned by the Lord, Satan must keep the appointment.

And here, Satan describes himself as being constantly on the move, up and down, to and fro, to cause trouble.

That's his goal in life. He seeks out humanity to menace them as the enemy of their souls. But note this, with great relief, note from the chapter, he can exercise none of his malevolent powers without God's permission.

All doors are locked to him until the sovereign God decides to open them to him. Let me give you a ten-second analysis of the book of Job.

Chapters 1 and 2 is the prologue. There's a poetic dialogue between chapter 3 and 27. There are a few monologues between 29 and 41.

[19 : 28] And then there's a rather wonderful epilogue. So a prologue, a dialogue, monologues, and an epilogue. The prologue. Satan was not greatly troubled by Satan's many advantages in life.

He was grieved by Job's impeccable morality. And his personal devotion to the Lord. That bothered him. God was able to say with obvious delight to Satan in verse 8, Have you considered my servant Job?

There's none like him in all the earth. He's blameless and an upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. Isn't it great when God's praising you?

And he was praising Job. Verse 9. Mm-hmm. The devil's retort. Does God fear Job for nothing?

Haven't you put a hedge around him, his house and all that he has?

You've blessed the work of his hands, you've increased his possessions, but only stretch out your hand and touch all he has, and he will curse you to your face. Satan, you know, was a liar from the beginning, so the Lord says.

[20 : 40] The first time we hear him speak in the Bible, he's uttering slanders, lies. In the Garden of Eden, his ploy was to destroy God's reputation with man.

With the newly created innocent man and woman through lies. to have them think wrongly about God and doubt the truth of his words, what he'd said.

We here are all proof that Satan was successful. Eve was first to fall for his lies and submit to his temptation.

Satan accused God to man. Said he was a, said God, will you really die when you disobey God?

The following, following this, the tempter accused man to God when he'd fallen. He accused God to man and then when he disobeyed disobeyed God's word, he accused man to God.

[21 : 55] Satan means the accuser. And he accused man to God and God condemned man. So true to character in Job, he seeks to destroy the reputation of godly men with God.

Satan hates God and he hates man. How did God respond to Satan with all this accusation?

Verse 12, very well, all that Job has, all that he possesses is in your hands, only against him personally do not stretch out your hand.

So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord to cause trouble. to demonstrate what he can and will do when he's given the opportunity. And Job's many servants are all killed.

His many oxen and donkeys are taken. Fire fell, burning up the sheep, lightning, we suppose, and servants. All Job's children are killed.

[23 : 11] And let me just pause there and say, folks, this is history. It's not a fable. It's not a story. There was a man in the land of Oz. All his children were killed.

Well, how did Job respond then? How would you expect him to respond? Verse 20, he got up, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell to the ground in self-pity.

No. He tore his robe, shaved his head, fell to the ground in worship, and said, naked I came from my mother's womb, naked I will return.

The Lord gave, the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord. In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrong. There's one in the eye for Satan, isn't it?

You see, but then he came back a second time, didn't he? With further accusations, and again, God gives him permission to do further damage. Skin for skin, a man will do anything to save his life.

[24 : 29] All right, God says, you're not going to kill him, but you'll have access to his body. I want to, in the time we've got left, consider three causes of human trouble, the reasons for suffering in the world.

There are a series of dialogues, monologues, in the next few chapters, but the 39 middle chapters are one long debate addressing a central problem.

And the central problem is this. In human life, experience, the comforters of Job in human life, good is always rewarded, and evil always means punishment.

Discuss. We have the theology of Job's comforters. Let me summarize it for you. Job is plunged into many graphically described deep trials and tragedies.

The saintliest man on earth is best remembered for the extent of his suffering. Why did bad things happen to such a good man?

[25 : 56] He experienced bereavement, boils, in the AV, we're told, emaciation, torment, depression, rejection, mockery, and contempt.

He lost livestock, he lost his health, he lost his reputation, he lost his friends, he lost his family, and his wife turned bitter against him, cursed God, and died, she said.

The Lord has given, having given so much to Job, it was all taken away. It would be strange if in these circumstances he didn't ask, what have I done to deserve this?

Has God stopped loving me? The theology of his friends is this, prosperity is the reward for obedience and good works, and all tragedy is the result of disobedience.

So that's the way they treated Job, sadly. There's a line from The Sound of Music, isn't there?

Somewhere in my youth and childhood I must have done something good.

[27 : 07] Nice song, what a piffle. Job's friends said, personal calamity was God's judgment on personal sin, but if you do something good then things will go well.

Job's comforters. So in the central dialogue they're saying if Job is suffering he must have sinned, and why don't you admit it, Job? Why don't you confess? Why don't you plead guilty and admit your moral failure?

Mrs. Job disagreed indignantly. I know my husband. He is not wicked. But God must be to make him suffer like this.

So her counsel to her husband was curse God and let him kill you. So three sources of human trouble. First of all, one, two, three, first of all, sometimes we're to blame for our own problems.

Agreed? Many problems are self-inflicted before blaming anything or anyone else. Honesty demands that we consider that possibility. A man reaps what he sows.

[28 : 24] And under each of these three headings I want to take just a brief example from Scripture to illustrate the point. Vindicating God's providence.

First, an Old Testament character who had only himself to blame for his calamities. Do you remember Samson? Samson was wayward and foolish.

He was headstrong. He was indulgent. He was impetuous. He was ill-tempered. In spite of his Nazarite oath of consecration where he must let his hair grow long and abstain from wine and so on, Samson gave free reign to his passions and his lusts.

He developed a penchant for wine and women. His reckless behavior led to his defeat. He was in bondage and weakness and he eventually was blinded and he was grinding out corn in the enemy Philistine prison.

Samson could only blame himself. Things could have been so different had he stayed faithful to God and to his Nazarite vows. The remedy for his trouble lay in personal repentance to stop playing with fire and to stop trivializing sacred things.

[29 : 53] That was the remedy for Samson. In contrast to Samson Job was blameless, God-fearing, wise, responsible, self-controlled.

He even made a covenant with his eyes not to look upon a maiden lustfully Job was not the cause of his own sufferings as Samson was. Secondly, often we are the victims of the folly and sinful behavior of others.

We endure heartaches caused directly by family, by friends, those we love as well as our enemies. Our lives are so bound up with one another in this world that at times we need protection from each other.

You and I are very capable of hurting others. There's a hymn that says some have friends that cause them pain.

An Old Testament example is David. Remember David? King David was plagued relentlessly by Saul. It was unjust and it was undeserved to be pursued by Saul.

[31 : 08] David had done nothing to deserve it. David for a long time had lived with the constant threat of being murdered. David, the victim of others.

And of course, a second illustration comes to mind. John the Baptist, whom the Lord praised to the hilt as God praised Job.

Jesus praised John the Baptist, said, of those born of women, none is greater than John the Baptist. His godliness was widely recognized.

Jesus only spoke well of him, feared and respected by Herod. John, nevertheless, John the Baptist became a victim of Herodias' resentment and vengeance.

Herod made a rash vow resulting in the beheading of the greatest saint of the day. Some awful request from a sinful woman which Herod granted and that cut John the Baptist's ministry short.

[32 : 20] An unprincipled, hate-filled woman brought his ministry to a violent end. How unfair! And we could cite further examples of men in the Old Testament particularly who were the victims of others, sinful treatment, Joseph, the victim of his brothers, ill treatment, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, Mordecai, Haman gave him a hard time.

Each was a victim of the sins of others. Finally, the third and final crucial point. The cause of our troubles may not be ourselves or others.

So what's the alternative? Well, I'm thinking of John chapter 9, the man born blind. This incident gave rise to a lot of religious discussion, questions posed by the onlookers.

Who sinned that this man should be born blind? Was it this man or his parents that he should be born blind? This view was based on a notion of the day that someone somewhere must be to blame for these tragic circumstances.

circumstances. So they are to ask, what have I done to deserve this? But this man was blind before he did anything good or evil, of course. He was born blind.

[33 : 57] And Jesus completely refuted the popular view. It was not that this man sinned, he said, nor his parents. Then why? But that the works of God may be manifest in him.

the blind man's condition would one day bring glory to God by what Jesus would do for the man. And we know that to be the case. Samson's blindness was of an altogether different order. So the third reason why things happen that hurt us, that God might be glorified in our suffering through it. It is here that we place Job's trials, his suffering glorified God. Lazarus, why did he die so prematurely?

Why did he become ill and die so tragically at perhaps such a young age? He died so that the God of heaven might be glorified.

[35 : 19] So what's the conclusion to all this? Job also suffered that the works of God might be displayed in his life. God first tested Job's faith.

Would he stay faithful under Satan's slanderous attack? God secondly used him as an example to others? How would he respond to adversity?

And he responded well. Or he had his questions as you read through the book and he's full of saying to God, why, why, why, why, why, what have I done?

Now then, tonight, I don't know you, but in that trial that you now bear, you can ask, is God using you in the same way as he did Job?

Could God even boast of you to Satan? Have you considered my servant? Put your name there.

[36 : 26] Job's story ends on a positive note, of course. It's not a sad ending. I said that we go to the beginning and then we go to the end. But just to say this, Job never discovered why he was suffering.

he never knew about this, this rare sight that we have in the cosmos of God and the angels, the hidden world of, that governs human circles.

He never knew that Satan had been brought before God and all this dialogue took place between them. He continued believing in the goodness of God even in his suffering.

His circumstances but were traced to decisions made in heaven between God and Satan. But the story ends well. Chapter 42 and verse 12.

The Lord blessed the latter part of Job's life more than the first. He once had 7,000 sheep.

[37 : 42] How many has he got now? 14,000. He once had 3,000 camels. How many now? He's got 6,000. He once had 500 yoke of oxen and 500 donkeys. How many has he got now?

1,000 each. After Job prayed for his troublesome friends, we read in verse 10, the Lord made him prosperous again and gave him twice as much as he had before.

He received exactly double what he'd lost. And as for the normal lifespan, what's the normal lifespan of man? I've exceeded it by a good way now, but it's three score years and ten. Yeah. Psalm 90. How long did Job live? 140. How much is that beyond? Twice as much. He lived twice as much. Now, can I go back to Gabriel and then we're finished. Gabby, you know the story I was telling you about. A Christian couple, when things opened up after Ceausescu was assassinated, a couple from California came, quite a few Americans visited Romania.

[39 : 03] Of course, they're all millionaires in California. This couple were rather wealthy and they called it Casa Nostra, our home, the orphanage, in the hope that they could adopt one of the children.

It's not allowed anymore now, but it was at the time, for a brief time after the revolution, and they did adopt one of the children. they adopted Gabby.

And he's grown up under their care. Just think of the circumstances where he was, the treatment he got from his evil parents to be brought up by a Christian couple who loved him to bits, brought up by a millionaire in California where the sun always shines.

That's Gabby. And he, the, some of our children know were adopted by Americans and two lovely twins were adopted and after a few years came back to Romania and they wouldn't speak Romanian in case they were kept in Romania.

They learned English and with an American accent and they wouldn't speak English because they, Romanian because they wanted to go back to America. Well Gabby, like Job, things worked out eventually.

[40 : 30] So for each Christian in fellowship with God, the story ends well. For without knowing it, Job, through his long trials, this was the truth.

The best was yet to be. And that's our hope. That's the Christian hope. The best is yet to be. Do you believe that? Yes. The final emotion of God's people, whatever you're passing through now, is joy, bliss.

Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man the things that God has prepared for those who love. meanwhile. That's where we are in this world, meanwhile.

Well, I've spoken long enough. Let's pray together. Father, we thank you for your wonderful word which is so relevant and so searching and so powerful and so encouraging about you.

It tells us about a God of love who loves us with an everlasting love. love. And we thank you that in every difficult condition, in sickness or of health, you are there.

[41 : 52] And you are there. And the knowledge of this means that we are not dismayed. Help us to hang on to you in faith. Strengthen us to stand in the face of unpleasant current circumstances, knowing that the Christian hope is just a wonderful thing.

and there's coming a day when all our labors and trials will be over and there will be no more sorrow, no more crying, no more pain, for all of these things will have been consigned to the past. So we thank you for your goodness. Give us patience and strengthen our faith always to believe in your goodness. Enable us to say as Job said, the Lord has given and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord. and for Jesus' sake we ask all this. Amen. Amen. We're going to sing.