

It's All About God

Job 1:1-2:10, 23:1-9, 16-17, 38:1-7, 34-41, 42:1-6, 10-17

October 25, 2009

I.

Today we heard the last of four readings from the Book of Job. And after the first installment earlier this month I said that I would talk about the entire book when the series was complete.

We all probably have heard of Job. Parts of his story have passed into popular culture even though the entire book itself is not widely read. The term "patience of Job," for example, comes from the New Testament Book of James (5:11), and in today's vernacular it describes someone who quietly suffers or stoically endures hardship over a long period of time.

In reality, however, the person of Job in the Bible was far from patient. While he went through much misery and pain, he did not do so silently. The story is full of Job's laments, complaints, and accusations. This is one of the ways in which the real story of Job differs from popular perception.

No one knows who wrote the Book of Job. Scholars speculate that it appeared between eight hundred to five hundred years before Christ's birth, and that the historical setting for the person Job might have been a thousand years earlier.

And it is not likely that the Book of Job describes actual historical events. Rather, it appears to portray a legend passed down over the centuries, perhaps with some later additions to reinforce the central message. It then was included in the Hebrew Scriptures to teach and illustrate certain principles. It might be called a case study in modern terminology.

But these variables do not detract from the sacred and holy nature of the story. Neither the time of its writing nor its nature as an epic saga are decisive in any way. Even Jesus' parables were hypothetical examples that he used to instruct the disciples and crowds that followed him. And we know that all Scripture, of whatever type or nature, is inspired by God (2 Ti. 3:16).

II.

A few moments ago I said the idea that Job was a patient man was not completely accurate. Another misconception is that the book's main theme is about human suffering, and bad things happening to good people.

In this respect I certainly will acknowledge that the Book of Job describes great suffering by a seemingly righteous and innocent person who, as we heard in the reading today, eventually was redeemed and ended up more prosperous than ever. And I understand how this outcome can lead to the idea that if we endure hardship, God will be with us and we will be blessed. In fact, the Bible supports that idea in other places.

But the point of Job's story is not human suffering. Rather, human suffering is only the setting for the real message. You might recall the classic movie *A Christmas Carol*, based on Charles Dickens 1843 story that featured Ebenezer Scrooge. The movie, however, was not about life in nineteenth century England, but rather one man's transformation from selfishness to generosity. Old England was the setting in which it occurred, but the point could have been made in many other ways.

The same is true of the Book of Job. Suffering and grief is the background or setting, but the real message is about the folly of human pride, a false sense of righteousness, and how they can interfere with a right relationship with God even among people of faith.

And Job was a man of faith, but he also was convinced he was righteous and thought he had earned God's favor. In his pride he didn't think he deserved the tragedy and grief that befell

him, and was angry at God for it. Job thought it was all about him, when in the end he found that it was all about God.

III.

With that as a start, let's look at Job's misfortune and ultimate deliverance. And because this involves readings beyond what we heard today I will review the basics of the entire drama.

You can follow along in your pew Bibles, beginning at page 434 if you want, although I will endeavor to summarize it all independently. The first five verses tell us that Job was blessed with ten children, thousands of cattle, sheep and other animals, and enjoyed great wealth.

Then the plot thickens. In verse six the scene shifts to heaven, and God and Satan are talking. This, by the way, is one of the reasons scholars believe that the Book of Job is instructional rather than historical. And God was bragging on Job. God basically said Job was the best. But Satan said, "Oh yeah, that's because you've been protecting him. He's really a fair-weather friend. Let me have a crack at him and I'll take him away from you in a flash."

So God said, "Deal! Have at him, but you can't hurt him." And then we see, in verses thirteen through nineteen in the second column on page 434, Satan brings disaster on Job's family, his servants, and his possession. His ten children died in a storm, his servants were killed by raiders, and his livestock were stolen. Nothing was left.

But through all this Job remained faithful. So the scene shifts back to heaven in chapter two at the bottom of page 434, where God is rubbing Satan's nose in it. "I told you so," God basically said. "Job still is the best." But Satan, not ready to give up, said, "Anyone can get through loss of property or the death of others, but let me afflict Job personally and he'll crack right away." And God said, "OK, but you just cannot kill him."

And so Job endured a second trial. Satan afflicted Job with painful and festering sores from head to foot, which is at the top of page 435, and Job was humiliated into scraping them all with a piece of broken pottery. Now he truly was suffering. And then Job's wife entered the picture and said, "See all of what God has done to you. You don't owe God anything now. You might as well tell God you're through with him." But Job still refused to deny God.

IV.

This sets the stage, and now I'm going to cover a lot of ground quickly. In fact this will summarize the rest of what happened, which is a fairly long story. And so if you pulled your Bibles out of the pews you might want to put them back.

Job had three friends who heard of his misfortune and came to visit him. The next twenty-four chapters consist of dialogues and disputes among the four of them about Job's plight, how it happened, and what it meant.

It began with a long and poignant lament by Job in which he basically cursed the day he was born, and wished he was dead because he believed God had abandoned him. Then, each of his friends offered variations on the idea of rewards and punishment that was at the foundation of ancient Jewish beliefs. This view held that God rewarded the righteous with health and prosperity, and punished the wicked with sickness and poverty. So Job's friends essentially told him, in elegantly poetic ways, that his problems were his own fault.

And as the discussion continued, Job became defensive, rejected his friends' explanations, and began to blame God for his fate. He claimed he was righteous, innocent, and faithful, and that God had betrayed him. Job challenged God to defend what he thought God had done to him.

With dialogue developing in this way an impasse soon was reached, and so another character entered the debate for the next six chapters. This new fellow, who had been standing on the sidelines listening, jumped in and criticized Job for defending himself and not recognizing God's sovereignty. And he introduced the idea that God had not punished Job out of wrath but rather had disciplined him for his pride, and there was a redemptive purpose in it that held hope.

And then for the next five chapters after that, God and Job spoke to each other. And God basically ignored Job's complaints and reminded him that God had created the cosmos before humanity ever existed. Who was Job, God asked, to challenge and judge his Creator?

This brings us to today's reading. Job had no answer to God, and saw the error of his ways. He acknowledged that in his self-righteousness he had forgotten about God. He had relied on his own understanding and had not trusted in God. Job repented and was blessed in the end with more than he ever had before.

V.

What a story! What can we learn from it? And what about this happy ending? Was it a reward for Job's repentance, or was it God's grace given for reasons beyond our understanding?

Parts of the story do not offer clear answers. There is no explanation of why people suffer, although it does appear that Satan, rather than God, is the instrument of misfortune and grief. And there is no explanation of why people prosper, although it is clear that God's grace is the ultimate source of our blessings. If there were clear answers to those questions life would be simpler. We all would be better able to avoid the first and achieve the second.

But there are some things we do know. They are in Job's story, they are in the Old Testament stories of God's interaction with the Hebrew people, and they are in the words of Jesus as he spoke them and as the apostles proclaimed them.

We know that we are God's creation. We know that he gives us life, offers his love, and wants to have a relationship with us. And it is not a relationship based on rewards and punishment, although consequences certainly can flow from our choices.

Instead, we know that God wants a relationship based on trust, grounded in faith that he is with us no matter what we might experience in this earthly life. And he hears our prayers and pays attention to what we do. We know that God has a plan for our lives (Eph. 1:8), and that all things work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose (Rom. 8:28).

In that respect you have heard me say that we should not assume God is limited to just one plan or purpose for our lives. He might have several plans, and the plan that actually happens is the one linked to our prayers and choices. Perhaps Plan A, for example is the default plan, but through prayer and Christian living we get Plan B. This idea means, of course, we must realize that God is the architect of all plans, and that his plans and purposes are heavenly mysteries.

And so, just as God asked Job who he thought he was to question God's sovereignty, so also we as God's people are called to recognize his presence in our lives and to accept his purpose in the blessings we have received. But this does not happen automatically. Our faith calls us to lead prayerful lives, to be good stewards, and to love God and our neighbors.

Job began his story by treating God as an umbrella, to be used on a rainy day but kept in the closet when the sun shines. The story ended when he realized that the sun does not really shine without God. I pray we also know that God will cover us when it rains, and that we always respond to God's call to seek the sunshine of his love and blessing. *Amen.*