

God's Sovereignty over Suffering: Job 1-2
Ben Reaoch, Three Rivers Grace Church
Sunday, September 6, 2009

We're beginning a sermon series on the Old Testament book of Job this morning, and I am so grateful to God for guiding us to this book at this time. I am continually amazed at the providence of God as I observe the details of life and see God's hand at work in so many ways. And the timing of this study is one of those providential blessings that I am so thankful for. It was some time ago that God put it on my heart to preach on Job after finishing 1 Timothy. And at the time I didn't know what trials would be facing our church at this time, but as I stand here today I know that this is God's timing and God's goodness to us to be opening up the book of Job in the midst of various trials that we are facing. I think of hardships and losses that many of you have been through recently or are going through now, and this has also become very personal in the last couple weeks as we've had some concerns about our pregnancy. A week ago Friday Stacy and I were able to see a heartbeat on the ultrasound, although the baby was not growing at the rate it should. And then last Saturday we lost our precious little baby. So in the last week this message has become real to me in whole new way. And I want you to know that I'm sharing these truths with you as one who is clinging to these truths myself. This is a sermon that I'm preaching to myself and to my wife and to my family in a time of loss, and I pray that it will be an encouragement to all of us.

In this life, suffering will touch each and every one of us. Some among us are in the middle of very difficult trials at this very moment. Whether it's health problems or the loss of a loved-one or financial problems or marital strife or family issues or work-related problems, we are all either facing a significant trial right now, or we will in the future. And the comfort that I hope we will find in this book of Job is that we need not fear the trials we are now facing or the trials that will come in the future, because our good and righteous God is in complete control of what happens to us. That may or may not seem comforting to you, but I hope by the end of this message you'll be able to see that God's sovereignty over suffering gives us great hope and peace and comfort as we face the trials of life.

Job 1:1-5

These first verses of the book of Job tell us about the character and the wealth of this man. Most importantly, his character. As verse 1 tells us, he was "blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil." Noah was described

in a similar way in Genesis 6:9, “Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God.” This kind of description does not mean that these men were sinless or perfect, but they were walking with the Lord. Job feared God and turned away from evil. His desire in life was to please God and serve God and to pursue righteousness.

The author wants us to know this at the outset so we can understand that Job’s suffering is not punishment for living a wicked life. That would be a different story, and a different lesson. But the lesson in Job’s life is to see God’s sovereignty over suffering, and God’s purpose in suffering for those who are seeking Him and walking with Him. Why do trials come to God’s children? That’s the question that Job wrestles with, and the question we must wrestle with.

Job 1:6-22

Here the narrative shifts to a conversation between God and Satan. God begins the conversation, which I think is significant. God begins and ends the conversation with Satan, both in chapter 1 and in chapter 2. When Satan comes before God, he can only speak when spoken to. God sets the agenda. And even though Satan hates God and opposes God, he can only do what God allows him to do.

In verse 8 God asks 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?” Here we find this description of Job’s character again. God is pleased with Job. He delights in Job. And God, as part of His plan to glorify His Name, points out to Satan this upright man. God has a plan in this—a plan that will magnify His sovereignty and goodness, a plan that will show the weakness and foolishness of Satan, and a plan that will ultimately bless Job. So God directs Satan’s attention to this blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil.

What is Satan’s response? In verses 9-11 Satan’s reply is essentially this: The only reason Job fears you, God, is because you take such good care of him. You’ve given him wealth and comfort and power and success, but allow him to go through some tough times, and he will surely curse you to your face. The Lord then grants Satan’s wish. He allows Satan to afflict Job. But notice the specific instructions. He allows Satan control of all that Job has, but He says, “against him do not stretch out your hand.” God tells Satan exactly what he can do and what he cannot do. He grants him permission to do so much harm, but no more. This is the irony of how Satan opposes God. He wants to destroy God, but in his efforts he is only serving God’s purposes. And that is

exactly what is happening here. Satan wants to see Job curse God, but the result is going to be the very opposite of that. Job will bless God, not curse Him.

After receiving this permission from the Lord, Satan went to work immediately to destroy everything Job had. The Sabaeans came and killed some of Job's servants and stole his oxen and donkeys, lightning came down from the sky and burned up his sheep and servants, the Chaldeans stole his camels and killed his servants. And what was most heartbreaking, a tornado came through and destroyed the house where all his children had gathered, and it left them all dead. The narrator recounts these details to us in the same way that Job, himself, received them. One messenger came with a bad report, and while he was still speaking another came, then another, and yet another, with increasingly horrific news. Job's wealth and Job's children were all taken from him in the same moment, and he receives the news in one earth-shattering succession of reports.

What will be Job's response? Will he curse God to His face, as Satan was hoping for? He does mourn, which is right and good. But the amazing thing is that in his mourning he does not curse God, but instead blesses God. It is not a hopeless grief that Job experiences here. It is a sorrow that is filled with hope and rooted in truth. He worships and says, "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."

Notice that Job doesn't mention Satan. He doesn't say, "The Lord gave, and Satan has taken away." He doesn't lament the fact that Satan is so destructive. He doesn't mention Satan at all, and we assume that he knew nothing about the conversation that had just taken place between God and Satan. Job skips over the immediate cause of his suffering, and looks directly to the ultimate cause. He knows that God is sovereign over this trial. He knows that God is in control. And so he says, "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." In this Satan's prediction is proven false. Rather than cursing God to His face, Job instead magnifies the greatness of God. He shows that he delights in God, not for the things that God has given him, but because of who God is. He clings to God, Himself. He hopes in God—the God who gives and takes away.

Then the narrator adds verse 22, lest we think that Job was wrong to attribute all of this to the Lord. Verse 22 says, "In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong."

Job 2:1-10

Chapter 2 repeats a very similar cycle, although here the affliction is directed at Job's own health. Again the Lord tells

Satan to consider Job. In verse 3 He says, “He still holds fast his integrity, although you incited me against him to destroy him without reason.” It’s so interesting to see the dynamic between Satan’s evil intentions and God’s good intentions. Satan wants to destroy Job so that Job will curse God, and God allows Satan to afflict Job. But God’s purpose is for good. And He calls Satan’s attention to Job once again, showing that Job’s integrity shines all the more brightly in the midst of the devastation that he has faced.

But Satan does not relent. He again challenges Job’s faithfulness to the Lord (verse 4). And again the Lord allows Satan to afflict Job (verse 6). So Satan struck Job with loathsome sores all over his body. And just when it seems that things can’t get any worse, Job’s wife enters the picture and discourages him even more. At this moment when he could have used her encouragement the most, she says in verse 9, “Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die.” Satan must have delighted to hear this. Satan hoped that Job would heed this advice. Job’s wife had fallen into the trap that Satan wants all of us to fall into when we’re facing a trial.

The miracle of the whole thing is that Job didn’t curse God and die. Rather, he replied to his wife in verse 10, “You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?” So again, even after further affliction, Job still clings to the goodness of God, and this section ends in the same way chapter 1 did, by telling us that in all this Job did not sin with his lips.

There are two points that I want us to see very clearly in these opening verses of Job. The first point is to see that God is sovereign over suffering. And the second point is to see that Satan is powerful but limited.

God is Sovereign over Suffering

God is very clearly in complete control of these events in Job’s life, and God is also in control of the trials that happen in our lives. God is the one who takes the initiative from the very beginning in these events. He initiates the conversation with Satan. And then even though it was Satan who directly orchestrated these tragic events in Job’s life, Job attributed his suffering to God. At the end of chapter 1, after he has lost his possessions and his children, he doesn’t say in anger, “Satan has destroyed my life!” Rather, in an act of worship he says, “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.” Likewise in 2:10 he says to his wife, “Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?” In both of these statements Job is acknowledging the fact that God is the ultimate cause of his suffering. He may or may not understand the

involvement of Satan in all of this, but he does understand that ultimately God has allowed these things to happen to him.

At this point, Job is a good example for us of how to respond to suffering. He perseveres in faith and trusts in God's plan even when it's very difficult to see why God would allow this to happen. James 5:11 is the only place where Job is mentioned in the New Testament, and it commends Job's perseverance. James writes, "Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful." God didn't let these calamities fall upon Job without purpose. He planned for all of this to happen to Job in order to build his faith and humble him and cause him to rely all the more on God's grace and goodness to him. And the Lord did bless Job's life. At the end of the book it says that "the Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning" (42:12). So in all of this the Lord truly was compassionate and merciful, as James says.

When we're in the midst of suffering, or when we're watching tragedies going on around us, it sometimes seems like insanity. We can't see the meaning or the purpose in it, and we are tempted to despair. But as Christians who put our faith in a sovereign and good God, we need to remember that God does have a plan, and His plan is compassionate and merciful and someday (even if it's not in this life) we will understand better why He allowed these things to happen.

Sarah Edwards gives us a good example of Job-like faith in the midst of suffering. Her husband was the famous Jonathan Edwards, who was a renowned theologian, philosopher, and pastor, and became president of Princeton College in 1758. But only a month after taking that position, at the age of 54, he died as a result of receiving a smallpox inoculation. What a seemingly senseless way to die. The inoculation was meant to keep him from getting smallpox, but instead it killed him. Sarah received word that her husband had died, and she wrote this letter to her daughter, who had also lost her husband just six months earlier. This is what Sarah wrote: "My very dear child, What shall I say! A holy and good God has covered us with a dark cloud. O that we may kiss the rod and lay our hands upon our mouths! The Lord has done it. He has made me adore his goodness, that we had [your father] so long. But my God lives; and he has my heart. O what a legacy my husband and your father has left us! We are given to God; and there I am and love to be. Your affectionate mother, Sarah Edwards."

Isn't that a God-honoring way to deal with suffering. There is, of course, sadness and grief and mourning, but there is

also a deep sense of peace and hope in the goodness of God. Our hope is in the fact that God is in control, and as mysterious as it may seem to us at the moment, He does have a good plan in the midst of our suffering and pain.

Satan is Powerful but Limited

The second main point to see here is that Satan is powerful but limited. We can picture him like a vicious lion, although he's constrained by an iron leash. He has the potential to do great harm, but he cannot do whatever he wants. God has him on a leash and tells him he can go this far and no farther. He can cause suffering to a certain extent, but no more. In chapter 1 God allows Satan to destroy everything Job has, but he can't harm Job himself. Then in chapter 2 God allows Satan to afflict Job, but again there is a clear boundary. He must spare Job's life. Satan is a vicious roaring lion, but his activity stops when God pulls on the leash. He cannot do anything beyond what God permits him to do.

1 Peter 5:8-9 tells us, "Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world." Satan wants to destroy us, and the only thing he really cares about is destroying our faith. Satan's goal is to make us doubt the greatness and goodness of God, and he will use whatever means he can to accomplish that goal. And it's not always suffering and pain that Satan uses. He often uses pleasure and prosperity to entice people away from putting their hope in God. This is such a danger, as we've seen in the messages the last two Sundays. Our money and our things can easily become an idol and take the place that God rightly deserves in our lives. We may look to material things as our ultimate hope, and Satan is very pleased when he sees that happening. This is one of the ways he seeks to destroy faith.

But Satan also uses suffering and pain in his efforts to destroy faith. In this way he desires to make us doubt God's goodness and provision in our lives. He wants us to think that God doesn't love us and doesn't care about us. But what Satan apparently doesn't realize is that God is using those same trials in our lives, not to destroy our faith, but to build it. Another passage in 1 Peter is relevant here, and it's 1 Peter 1:6-7, "In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ." Do you see the purpose of the trials? It's not that our faith would fail, but that our faith would be tested

and refined and shown to be genuine, and because of this we can rejoice. Satan has a goal to destroy faith, but God's purpose in our suffering is to refine and purify and strengthen our faith, so that when Jesus returns our faith will be shown to be genuine. Satan may succeed to a certain degree in discouraging us and causing us to doubt God's goodness, but in the life of the true believer, God's purpose will prevail as His children learn to lean on Him alone and cling to Him in the most difficult trials.

These are the two truths I hope you will take to heart and cling to as you face the trials of life. First, that God is completely sovereign over suffering. And secondly, that Satan's role in your suffering is limited, even though he is a powerful foe. He is on a leash, and can do no more than God allows. Therefore we can trust that in the most difficult trials of life, God is at work in those trials to build our faith, to refine us and purify us. He is working for our good. We can trust the promise of Romans 8:28, that "for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." That is not just an abstract feel-good kind of saying. It is a rock-solid, concrete and definite promise of God, that the hardship you are facing right now, or will face in the future, will somehow work for your good, if you are a believer. If you are in Christ, then the punishment for your sin has already been paid by Him on the cross. And now God is doing good to you. Even in the suffering, especially in the suffering, He is drawing you closer to Himself and causing you to trust in Him more.

William Cowper was a man who lived a life of severe trials, and yet he was still able to write about God's sovereignty and goodness in the midst of suffering. Cowper lived in England in the 1700s, and he was a contemporary of George Whitefield, John Wesley, and the great evangelical revival that took place there in those days. But Cowper's life was filled with hardships and trials. His mother died when he was six years old, and then after that his father sent him to a boarding school, and it seems that his life never recovered from those trials in his early years. He suffered from severe depression the rest of his life. One source of encouragement in his life was his pastor, John Newton, whom we know as the author of the hymn, "Amazing Grace." Cowper was a poet as well, and Newton spurred him on to write hymns, hoping that this kind of creative work would help him cope with his depression. Newton actually had Cowper work with him to write an entire hymnal. Newton wrote about 200 hymns, and Cowper wrote 68. And one of those hymns that Cowper wrote is entitled, "God Moves in a Mysterious Way." I want to share the words of this hymn with you because I think they capture so well how we

should view the God-ordained suffering we will all experience in life.

God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea
And rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never failing skill
He treasures up His bright designs
And works His sovereign will.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy and shall break
In blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.

Blind unbelief is sure to err
And scan His work in vain;
God is His own interpreter,
And He will make it plain.

Isn't the imagery of that hymn so powerful and beautiful and true. The stormy clouds of life come upon us that we so much dread, and yet we will eventually find that they are big with mercy and that they shower down blessings upon us. The bud may have a bitter taste, but as the fullness of the trial blossoms, sweet will be the flower. Verse 3 really sums up the lesson we should take from all this. Don't try to question God and tell Him how He should handle things. Rather, trust that He has a merciful plan, as mysterious as it may be in the moment. Trust that behind the frowning providence of your situation, God is smiling down on you and working for your eternal good.

In closing, I want to point out that the place we see this the most vividly and the most powerfully is in the cross of Christ.

This is where we see the beaming, smiling, gracious face of God behind the most intense agony that has ever been experienced in the history of the universe. Jesus Christ suffered more than we can even imagine, not only the physical pain of torture and crucifixion, but infinitely greater than that was the emotional and spiritual agony of having the sin of the world placed on His shoulders. But it was for a good and glorious purpose, that God's grace would be magnified, and Christ's righteous life and sacrificial death would be exalted in the salvation of sinners.

I pray that as we experience suffering we will look to the ultimate suffering that Jesus Christ endured on behalf of all those who repent of their sin and put their trust in Him. That's what I plead with you to do this morning. Turn away from your sin and your self-reliance, and put your hope in Jesus Christ. Put your hope in the One who was like Job, although much greater than Job. Job was blameless and upright. He feared God and turned away from evil. But Jesus Christ was sinless and perfect. Job suffered great loss and excruciating pain under the hand of God. Jesus Christ, to a far greater degree, suffered under God's wrath against sin. He was the ultimate righteous sufferer. And He suffered for us.

So in the relationship between suffering and the sovereignty of God, I hope that the cross of Christ will be a clear display for us of how God ordains suffering for good. And as we trust in Christ, who was crushed by God, we can then trust also that our suffering has a good purpose. While we often cannot see the good that will come from our own suffering, we can trust that God is in control, and He has planned every hurt and pain for our eternal good.