

## “He Still Persists in His Integrity”

Job 1:1; 2:1-10

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Why do bad things happen to good people? What role does *God* play in human suffering? Why would a *good* God allow people to experience misery and pain? Questions like these are front and center in the book of Job. It is an exploration of the theology of suffering, told in the form of a story.

I was in college the first time I read the book. The theological questions captivated me. At the end, I was left feeling somewhat perplexed. I wasn't sure the book adequately *answered* the questions.

The lectionary provides readings from the book of Job over the course of four weeks. We'll start exploring them today. You will probably leave here today with more questions than answers. That's fine. What I wonder is, will we have *answers* to the theological questions by the time we reach the end?

So, from the top. “There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.” Who is this man Job? How does he fit into the larger biblical story? Where is the land of Uz? Let's start there first. The land of Uz is mentioned only three times in the Bible. Those passages imply that it is somewhere to the east of Israel: perhaps east of the Jordan River, in what is now the country of Jordan; perhaps somewhere in the Arabian peninsula; perhaps all the way beyond the Euphrates River. We don't have enough information to know for sure. So let's move on to another question. Who was Job? Was he an Israelite? Can we fit him into any of the biblical genealogies? Job himself is not mentioned in any other book of the Bible, except for two passing references in the book of Ezekiel, where he is lifted up as a man of very strong character, along with Noah and Daniel; and one quick mention in the New Testament book of James. None of those passages give us any additional information about this man or his relatives. All that we know about Job and his family comes from the book of Job itself. The only family members who are named are three daughters who were born to Job late in his life – Jemimah, Keziah, and Keren-happuch – but those three aren't mentioned anywhere else in the Bible. So Job stands alone and apart. We don't know where he lived, or when, or any of his other relatives. Maybe there's a reason for that. Maybe one of the points of the story is that it could be *anyone's* story: anyone, anywhere, anytime.

There are, however, some people who think that the story of Job belongs between the books of Genesis and Exodus. For years I puzzled over this. Where did they get that idea? I finally figured it out. The Greek translation of the book of Job, which was made from the Hebrew original about 200 years before Jesus, contains a couple extra paragraphs at the very end. Those paragraphs say that Job lived “on the borders of Edom and Arabia,” and that he was a grandson of Esau, and a great-great-grandson of Abraham. That would make Job a second cousin, once removed, of the twelve sons of Jacob, the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel. You're not going to find those two paragraphs in most Bibles, and

most Christian and Jewish interpreters would say those paragraphs aren't authoritative or historically reliable, but at least now I understand why some people think Job lived some 15 centuries before Jesus.

At the beginning of Job's story, he has seven sons and three daughters. He also has "seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and very many servants. This man was the greatest of all the people of the east." But Job was about to lose it all.

One day Job receives a series of very bad reports. First, Job learns that all his oxen and donkeys were captured by raiders. Then Job hears that his sheep have all died in a fire. Next, he is told that raiders have captured all his camels. Finally, Job receives a report that his sons and daughters were all together in a house, and a mighty wind came and blew the house down, and all ten of them are dead.

Any one of those calamities would be enough to cause most of us to curse and wail. All of them together would push most of us over the edge. Some of you have experienced tragic losses that have left scars. Multiply those by a factor of ten, or more. That is what Job has experienced – all in a *single day*. Job's response? "Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head" – that's a sign of mourning – "and fell on the ground and worshiped." Job got down on his knees and *praised God*. He says, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." And "in all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing."

But Job is not aware of what is going on behind the curtain. For God is *very much involved* in the suffering that Job is experiencing. God, and a certain spiritual being called *Satan*. We read: "One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them." The heavenly beings are angels. Satan, in classic Christian theology, is a *fallen* angel. In Hebrew, the word *satan* means "adversary." Often, the word means just that: a human "adversary," an "opponent," an "enemy." David, for example, sometimes used the word the word *satan* to refer to his human adversaries, without any spiritual meaning. But when, in Hebrew, the word "the" is placed before the word *satan*, when it reads, literally, "*the Adversary*," that's a reference to something else: a spiritual being that is demonic, diabolical, *evil*. That's what we have in the book of Job. A spiritual being, who is – at this point in the biblical story – still allowed to come into the presence of God. Satan appears, by name, in the Old Testament only in the books of 1 Chronicles (once), Zechariah (twice), and eleven times in the book of Job, though of course many Christians see Satan in the snake that tempts Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and some Christians also see Satan in the great biblical sea monster, called "Leviathan" or "Rahab." Satan is mentioned by name *much* more frequently in the New Testament.

So what does Satan – the Adversary – want, and what does God allow Satan to do? There are two scenes involving Satan in the opening chapters of Job. In the first, Satan presents himself before God, in the assembly of all God's holy angels. God says to Satan: "Where have you come from?" Satan responds: "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." It would seem that Satan has been looking around for someplace where he might cause some mischief. God says: "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil." Is God suggesting that Satan should try to tempt Job? Satan replies: "Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a fence 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." Satan is insinuating that God has put a "hedge of protection" around Job, so that Job's life has been especially blessed, and Job himself is impervious to Satan's designs. Satan continues: "But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face." Satan

makes his goal clear: he wants Job to curse God. But he can't do that unless God *allows* bad things to happen to Job. God – amazingly! – agrees to this. God says: “Very well, all that he has is in your power; only do not stretch out your hand against him!” That is: you can do whatever you want to Job's family and Job's property – but nothing directly to Job himself. So Satan leaves, to wreak havoc on Job's life. That conversation is what leads to the deaths of Job's ten children, and the loss of all of Job's livestock.

What is this – some kind of cosmic chess game between Satan and God, with Job's *life* – and the lives of his family members, his animals, and his servants – all nothing but *pawns*? Is God that *cavalier*?

So Job's life begins to fall apart around him. But he refuses to curse God. “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.” Satan's ploy has failed. So he tries again.

The angels assemble before God a second time. Satan also comes, a second time. God asks: “Where have you come from?” Satan replies: “From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.” The conversation starts *exactly* as it did before. God says: “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil.” These are the *exact same words* they had said before. But now, God adds: “He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason.” God is saying: “You tried, and failed. *I win.*” Satan replies: “Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives.” Satan misunderstands; he thinks the only reason why Job isn't cursing God is because Job is afraid that if he does so, God will kill him. Satan asks God to take the game to the next level: “But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face.” God – amazingly! – agrees to this too. God says: “Very well, he is in your power; only spare his life.” So Satan leaves, with permission from God to do whatever he wants to Job, as long as Job stays alive.

So begins the next level of Job's suffering: “Satan went out from the presence of the Lord, and inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head.” Job picks away at the sores. “Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes.” This time he doesn't get down on his knees and worship God. But he still doesn't curse God, and he still doesn't sin.

All this suffering and misery may not have pushed Job to the brink – but his wife is a different matter. “Do you still persist in your integrity?” she asks. “Curse God, and die.” She believes that if Job curses God, God will kill him, and Job's suffering will end. Hmm. I wonder where she got such an idea.

Job says to her: “You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?” Job seems surprised by his wife's words; evidently this is not typical behavior for her. She's ready to give up on God, ready to throw in the towel on everything she believes. Job himself perceives that God is somehow behind his suffering, but he is not willing to give up on his faith. The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away. But he no longer blesses the name of the Lord.

Job and his wife are, in that respect, not unlike many people today. They have suffered terribly. One is ready to give up on her faith. The other is holding onto faith, but tenuously. He still believes in God. He just no longer thinks God is worthy of praise. What neither of them realize is that there is a malevolent force *also* at work, trying – and, to an extent, *succeeding* – in leading them away from God.

But what is *God's* role in all this? Why is God *allowing* Satan to do these awful things, to cause all this misery and pain? For the answer, you'll either need to keep reading, or come back next week....

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