

FGBC: Sanctifying Suffering: Skin for skin?

Job 1:1-2:10

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If you've got a Bible in front of you, or you've got one on your phone please open up to Job chapter 1. You will find Job just before the book of Psalms which is in the middle.

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I want to start by getting you to ask yourself a sobering and terrible question. Are you ready for it? Here it is: "What would it take for you to curse God and die?"

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Today we are starting a new series on the book of Job. And this question – "What would it take for you to curse God and die?" – is one that is going to come up several times over the next 5 weeks since it sits at the core of what this book challenges.

But don't get depressed. Job is anything but a depressing book. The goal of Job is that we would put our trust in a God so sovereignly in control of the universe that He can confidently use a flawed man named Job to gain an undisputed open victory over Satan. God defeats Satan, and HE uses this man named Job to do it.

So a second goal Job has is that it wants to inspire us to say "More than anything else I want to be used by God to increase His glory and defeat Satan. I don't primarily want a new boat. I don't want my kids to do well in school. I don't want to get the perfect relationship. I don't want a good job or a comfortable future. More than anything else I want to be used by God to increase His glory and defeat Satan." Do you want that?

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Let me introduce you to Job. Look at Job chapter 1 verse 1.

[Read Job 1:1-3]

There are a couple things that the author wants us to know about Job right up front. Job is a good guy. He's not perfect, no one is, but he's blameless and upright. This means he lives his life with the fear of God at the very front of his mind. He is always thinking "I want to honour God with everything I do. I'm seeking His pleasure first. I'm about what He wants more than about what I want." This is who Job is.

And on top of this he is incredibly rich. He's rich in family; he has 7 sons and 3 daughters. And he is rich in money. He has 7000 sheep and 3000 camels, a bunch of oxen and donkeys. Now in Hebrew literature the numbers 7 and 3 mean perfection and completion. So the author's point is that Job has the perfect family and he sits atop a perfect fortune. He's the richest man alive.

But these two things aren't the main point of Job's story. Job's wealth isn't a blessing God has given him because he is righteous. In fact that is one of the ideas that the book tears down. And so in the next verses we get what is really important about Job. Verse 4.

[Read Job 1:4-5]

So Job's real passion is not his wealth, but the honour and glory of God. And so every time his kids hold a party his first concern is making sure they are right with God. And so just in case in their foolishness any of them had spoken out against God he offers a sacrifice on their behalf. Job is a righteous man.

But then calamity strikes. Look down at verse 13

[Read Job 1:13-19]

Can you imagine a moment like that? Everything in Job's world comes crashing down. All his wealth is destroyed by evil men and natural disasters, and then totally dwarfing that all his children die. Imagine the shock and disbelief.

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Here is where the relevance of this story comes crashing home. Suffering is one of those factors that levels the table of human experience. I doubt anyone here has suffered the exact same way Job did, but everyone suffers. And when we suffer it is no comfort at all to know someone has suffered worse. Suffering always hurts.

And some of us are suffering right now. Maybe it's sickness. Or maybe it's losing a job. Maybe it is a breaking or broken relationship. Or maybe someone you love is suffering and this is tearing you apart.

Others of us aren't suffering today. But if this is you I've got bad news. Trouble is around the corner. Now I'm not cursing you; I'm just speaking about the human reality. We living a world broken by sin,. And so the longer you spend in this world the higher the probability that you are going to suffer.

So isn't it true that when we hear of a person dying in their late 90's we say "wow, what a great life." But there is another side to this. The funerals I've done for these people are usually small with little fan fair because almost everyone close to them has already died. That's suffering!

So the question is not "How will you respond if you suffer?" But "How are you going to respond when you suffer?"

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Now there is a theology that sometimes gets preached in church, and that is that the righteous get blessed while the wicked are punished. This is called the health and wealth gospel. And people who espouse this cling to texts in the Bible like:

The house of the righteous contains great treasure, but the income of the wicked brings ruin. (Proverbs 15:6)

And

No harm overtakes the righteous, but the wicked have their fill of trouble.
(Proverbs 12:21)

These are proverbs. But while ultimately it is true that justice will reign – God will judge every person for what they have done – this is a future reality, not the present. And so proverbs are not promises. Proverbs are things that are generally true, but not always.

So if you want to live a long life don't pick "assassin" as your profession. That's good advice. But I imagine there are some assassins who do live long lives – they are the ones who don't accept the mission to kill Jason Borne. As an aside I always wonder "don't the bad guys in these shows watch TV?" Like, I would not take that mission!

But the reality is, in this world bad things happen to both bad and good people. Another way to say this is that suffering is almost always disconnected from meaning.

Now I'm not talking about when you suffer for being stupid. You drink and drive and crash. That's your fault. I'm talking about when storms force 2 million people from their homes in Japan and 200 lose their lives. And we ask "Why?" But there is no answer. God isn't punishing them. This is suffering that comes from living in a fallen world.

And back in April when that semi truck collided with the Humboldt bus killing 16 and injuring 13 more it wasn't karma raging against the evils of hockey. Most of the time there is no rhyme or reason to suffering. At least not that we have access to.

But here the author of Job gives us an insight into something our natural eyes never see. He brings us into heaven and lets us eavesdrop on a conversation between God and Satan. Look at verse 6.

[Read Job 1:6-8]

Now this passage is one I never learned about in Sunday school. The God in this story seems a little uncomfortable to be around. At least I think so. So what do you do when you come across texts like this?

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Well, when we come across texts that don't sit comfortably with our picture of who God is there is a correct way and a wrong way to proceed. The wrong way is to say "This is terrible. I don't like this text, and so I'm just going to focus on texts I like." Lots of people do that. So I've heard people say "I like Jesus, but I don't really like Paul."

When I hear people say that I think "You probably haven't read much Jesus because if you think He is warm and fuzzy you are reading a different Bible than the one I've read." Jesus says way more terrible things than Paul ever does.

And so the correct way to read passages that challenge our idea of who God is, is to first state what we know about God.

So we know that God isn't clumsy. He isn't foolishly misspeaking here. God means to do and say everything He does. And so what that means is God must be setting Job up for trouble here. He knows Satan is up to no good, and actually introduces Job to him – "Have you considered my servant Job?"

God's proud of Job. And He presents him to Satan as an example of someone who could handle the worst Satan can throw at him.

Now I say this very carefully. And that's because another thing we know about God is that He is good. He never toys with us. God doesn't get a kick out of watching you squirm. That would be wrong, and that isn't what is happening here.

So hold those two things together. Let's keep going because Satan isn't impressed that God is impressed with Job. Look at verse 9.

[Read Job 1:9-12]

Now one of the reasons we don't like this story is because it goes against one of the common mistakes people believe about God. People think God is all about us. Christians believe that God is all about us. After all God loved the world so much that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have ever lasting life.¹ He must love us most of all.

Well, it's true that God does love the world. He loves us. But He doesn't love us first. We aren't the most important thing to Him. If we were then God would be an idolater. Whatever you love first is your god. We would be God's God. But look at how God operates with Job. He hands him over to Satan. He couldn't have done this if Job was the most important thing to Him because what if something bad happened? God would be destroyed. Whenever your god lets you down you are destroyed.

But Job isn't God's God. You see God isn't most concerned about your health and safety. He cares about your health and safety, but it isn't the most important thing to Him. There are a few things more important for Him.

For example God cares more about what He knows we need than what we want. So we want comfort and safety, but what He wants for us is Christlikeness. He knows that this is what is actually good for us. He knows this is where our ultimate joy resides.

But even our growing in Christlikeness isn't the most important thing. If our sanctification was God's God then any time someone ended poorly God would be destroyed.

¹ John 3:16

But God's joy is not dependant on the fickleness of humanity. And that's because He centers His life around the most important and solid thing in the universe. And there is nothing more solid or worthy of His focus than Himself and His glory. So everything He does is focused on this. Even His love for us comes out of this.

Now you can read this all over the Bible, but here is one example. In Isaiah God says:

Yet for My own sake and for the honor of My name,
 I will hold back My anger and not wipe you out.
 I have refined you, but not as silver is refined.
 Rather, I have refined you in the furnace of suffering.
 I will rescue you for My sake—
 yes, for My own sake!
 I will not let My reputation be tarnished,
 and I will not share My glory with idols! (Isaiah 48:9-11)

This is what is happening in our text today. God is testing Job in the furnace of suffering because He is after something greater than Job's comfort. He is after the increase of His own glory.

Now you might not like this. It might make you angry that God doesn't think you are the most important thing in the universe, but the cards are in – you and I are not as important as God. And it's not wrong for Him to think this – it's true. He is the Creator, we are the creation.

Now yes, God takes great pleasure and pride in us. Like a master sculptor takes pride in his statue, God loves creation. But He isn't confused about the worth of what He has put together. He knows He alone is worthy of worship. And so God sets up Job for this purpose. He is going to use Job to demonstrate the superiority of His worth.

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But Satan thinks Job is a fraud. He thinks that Job loves God to get God to give him good stuff. But in verse 12 God says "You think so? You are on. Go for it Satan. Take what you want from Job. Let's find out whether he loves Me for Me or just My stuff."

And that's when calamity strikes. Job loses everything seemingly for no reason. He hasn't done anything wrong – in fact he has been righteous. His suffering seems meaningless. But it isn't. Something of incredible meaning is happening. God is demonstrating to the heavenly hosts that He is of paramount importance in Job's heart.

God does the same thing with Abraham when He asks him to sacrifice Isaac, and then later with Jesus when the Spirit drives Him into the desert to be tempted by Satan. And both Abraham and Jesus prevailed.

And likewise here Job prevails and proves that he loves God, not God's stuff. And we see this in verse 20 and 21.

[Read Job 1:20-21]

God proved Satan wrong. Job didn't curse God when he lost everything. Instead he worshiped and blessed Him. And in this moment the superior worth of God was made evident and God's glory was increased. God's glory, which is like His renown or His fame, is increased every time His creation chooses to value Him above everything else.

So the question is what is first in importance in your life? Is there anything you value more than God? If there is then this is your god. And if it were taken away you would curse God and die.

This is why billionaires commit suicide when stock markets crash. When your god lets you down there is nothing else to do. So choose the right God.

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Job's suffering isn't finished. Satan strikes again in the beginning of chapter 2. Just as Job is coming to grips with his incredible loss Satan and God have another meeting and Satan says: Job will curse you if you take his health – skin for skin. "A man will give all he has for his health." But God says "Not Job. There are some in My creation who value Me more than anything else and Job is one of them. Give it your worst."

And so Job is afflicted with painful sores from the top of his head to the tip of his toes. Later we learn that they were boils that ran with puss and got infested with worms. This isn't chickenpox – this is nasty.

And as Job's health fails the faith of his wife falters. Look at chapter 2 verse 9.

[Read Job 2:9]

Now before you are too hard on this woman, consider this: She has endured the loss of her wealth and family without cursing God. But as her husband falters we find out that he was her god. Jesus says:

If you love your father or mother more than you love Me, you are not worthy of being Mine; or if you love your son or daughter more than Me, you are not worthy of being Mine. (Matthew 10:37)

God demands to be God in our lives. But He does this for our good. He knows that the best thing for Him is also the best thing for us. And so He works to get us to make His God our God. And sometimes He uses suffering to bring this about. Look at verse 10.

[Read Job 2:10]

Job nails it. And imagine what that moment was like in heaven. God and Satan surrounded by thousands of angels. And when Job's wife speaks you can see Satan start to smile, but then at Job's words thousands of hands stretch into the air and thousands of voices shout "Worthy is the God of Job." And Satan runs in defeat.²

This is what Peter is getting at when he says:

Stay alert! Watch out for your great enemy, the devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. Stand firm against him, and be strong in your faith. Remember that your family of believers all over the world is going through the same kind of suffering you are. (1 Peter 5:8-9)

Peter means Satan wants your destruction, and he will use anything from pleasure to pain to accomplish this. He wants to shift your focus away from God. And he wants this because he wants to steal your greatest joy which is found only when you are doing what you were created to do.

But Satan can be beaten. You can beat him by standing firm in your faith and worshipping God instead of cursing Him.

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At the beginning I asked the question "What would it take for you to curse God and die?" The answer is it would take the removal of your god. If your most important treasure is your car, then you will curse God and die when your car is destroyed. If the most important thing to you is your kids, or your money, then you will curse God when they are taken away. If the most important thing to you is your health – skin for skin – then you will curse God if you lose that. And if the most important thing to you is your spouse then you will curse God when you lose them.

The only escape from losing your greatest joy, to Satan's pleasure, in suffering, is to have the right God. You need a God worthy of your worship. You need a God able to give you the greatest joy and meaning in life, and only Jesus can do this, and He wants to do this for you. He wants your joy.

In Luke Jesus tells Peter and us:

Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift each of you like wheat. But I have pleaded in prayer for you, Simon, that your faith should not fail. So when you have repented and turned to Me again, strengthen your brothers. (Luke 22:31)

Friends, Jesus is praying for you. Do you think God hears that prayer?

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I want to conclude with three thoughts for how to live joyfully in the midst of suffering.

² Paragraph adapted from John Piper <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/job-reverent-in-suffering> (Accessed July 14, 2018)

First, you undoubtedly noticed that two times in this story God handed Job over to Satan. At first this looks crazy, but we know there is no struggle in heaven. Satan may be a lion, but he is on a leash. And this means ultimately the difficult things we face come from God not him. But ironically this is good news.

So after Satan has done his worst Job responds “The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.” And later “Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?” And the author notes “Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.”

So Job acknowledges that God, not Satan, is ultimately in control of suffering. And friends, if there were a cosmic struggle in heaven; if God and Satan were equals, then our futures would not be secure. But God is sovereign. Nothing can happen to us outside His control, and He is good and that means He is accomplishing our ultimate good through the situations we find ourselves in.

Now this doesn’t mean suffering is good – it isn’t. But even in suffering and death, which the Bible says is the greatest enemy, God is in control and bringing about His greater plan.

And this means you can give your life to God and rest. God has your greatest good in mind. Your greatest good is to image Christ. And so God may allow Satan to make you suffer, but even Satan is a tool in the hand of God. So trust that God is at work in what you are facing even when you can’t see it.

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Second, be comforted by Job’s response to his loss in verse 20. When disaster struck “Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground.”

To accept that God is working through our suffering does not mean we don’t mourn when we suffer. Grief is not sin. It’s not sin to weep and be distraught when disaster strikes. And it is not righteousness to maintain a stiff upper lip. That’s not what Jesus did when Lazarus died. He wept.

So let yourself weep when calamity strikes, and weep with those who weep.

Finally, let the suffering you face be like a furnace drawing out your dross and causing you to image Christ. Don’t let it destroy you like Satan wants. Instead let it enable you to see and possess the greatest Treasure in the universe.

It is those who have God for their God that live the greatest life possible. The way to win at life is to do what we were created to do. And that is to worship God by valuing Him more than we value anything else. He is more valuable than wealth or family or health. And David says “The steadfast love of the Lord is [even] better than life.”³ So let Jesus’ prayer for you come to pass. Let your suffering lead you to the greatest good and the greatest joy that exists. Let it lead you, like Job, to God Himself.

³ Psalm 63:3