

Our Hope at the Last

Job 1:1-12

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ August 24, 2014 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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1There 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. **2**There were born to him seven sons and three daughters. **3**He had seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and very many servants; so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east. **4**His sons used to go and hold feasts in one another's houses in turn; and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. **5**And when the feast days had run their course, Job would send and sanctify them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all; for Job said, "It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts." This is what Job always did.

6One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them. **7**The LORD said to Satan, "Where have you come from?" Satan answered the LORD, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." **8**The LORD said to Satan, "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." **9**Then Satan answered the LORD, "Does Job fear God for nothing? **10**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. **11**But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face." **12**The LORD said to Satan, "Very well, all that he has is in your power; only do not stretch out your hand against him!" So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD. (Job 1:1-12, NRSV)

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There are two kinds of suffering in this world, one kind we can accept and the other kind we find very difficult to accept.

The first kind of suffering is deserved and we know it. I make a decision to drive too fast and talk on my phone while I do and I total my car and spend six weeks in the hospital recovering from my injuries. Sometimes hardship comes, either in the form of consequences or punishment, because we make poor or immoral choices which directly lead to our suffering or the suffering of others. This suffering isn't easy to take, but at least we understand why it's happening.

It's the other sort of suffering we find hard to live with. An earthquake causes a tsunami which crashes to shore and takes the lives of thousands upon thousands of people who, in no way, caused the earthquake. Or at a more personal level, a young mother who's been the model of health is suddenly stricken with a cancer nobody can explain and dies six months later leaving her young children without a mom. When this sort of suffering happens in life it never makes sense. There are no explanations which satisfy us, and that often leaves us angry, desperate, hopeless, wondering how such evil and pain can occur in a world which is supposedly controlled by a good and loving God.

It's this second kind of suffering that is the suffering of Job. Because his story is one of the oldest in all of scripture, we know that people have been struggling to make sense of this kind of suffering for a long, long time.

The name Job literally means "hated one" or "persecuted one". What a wonderful choice his parents made. "Here's our new son. We've decided to name him Hated One." Imagine growing up with that identity hanging over you. What must have seemed odd to all who knew this man was that for a long time the name didn't fit. You see, Job was anything but hated or persecuted. On the contrary, he was highly revered by his community, the greatest man from among all his people. His family was a model family, gathering regularly together to feast and enjoy one another. His wealth was unparalleled – 7,000 sheep is a lot of sheep by anybody's standards. On top of it all he was blameless and upright. He wasn't perfect, but if there was a man who lived a life of faithfulness before God in that day it was Job. And so everybody who knew him must have wondered how in the world this man, of all people, got stuck with such a name.

In time, they understood.

One day, as the angels are gathering before the Lord, the great Accuser, the one named Satan, slips in among them after having roamed to and fro upon the earth. Perhaps anticipating the Accuser's intent, the Lord asks him if during his travels he happened to notice his servant Job, a blameless man with no equal on the earth. The Accuser did notice Job but was not impressed. "The only reason Job is so faithful to you," he scoffed, "is because you pamper him like a pet. You bless everything he does!"¹ Do you hear the accusation? It's subtle but it's pointed. The only time people have faith in God is when God makes life easy. Make life hard and faith evaporates. Suffering and faith simply cannot coexist. That is the claim of the Accuser.

Well at once the Lord takes issue with this accusation. "Very well," God says, "all that Job has is now under your control. As long as you don't take his life, do to him whatever you wish." The Accuser does not have to be told twice. The next verses describe how all of Job's wealth is suddenly taken from him, every last sheep, every last camel. Next, in a terrible tragedy all of Job's ten children are killed, every last son, every last daughter. Finally, Job is inflicted with dreadful sores all over his body, ulcers and scabs from head to foot which itched and oozed so badly that Job resorted to scraping his skin with a shard of broken pottery. When the devil is done with him, all Job can do is sit atop a trash heap among the ashes. He is now a man who has finally lived up to his name. And all of heaven, along with hell, waits and watches to see if the Accuser is right, if suffering and faith truly cannot coexist.

Before we answer that question, let's pause to acknowledge two realities made clear in the story here which we cannot ignore.

First, the scripture is telling us here, as it tells us at many other points, that there actually is an Accuser roaming² this world seeking to deceive and destroy and divide God's people. The Devil is real, and much of the suffering in this world, especially that second sort of suffering which we cannot explain, is initiated by this Accuser. Do you understand? Evil is never initiated by God. The hand of God never causes evil. That does not mean, however, that God does not allow evil and suffering. Clearly he does. The story plainly shows us that, leaving us with a tension we cannot easily resolve. The good and all-powerful God of our universe does not inflict evil on this world but does, in his own time and for his own reasons, allow it to be inflicted. This tension is the first reality which we may never be able to explain away, but which we must nonetheless acknowledge to be true.

The second reality affirmed here is that the Lord allows evil and suffering to fall on even his most faithful servants. Job's story goes to great length to demonstrate that the suffering Job endured did not come as a direct consequence or punishment for his sin. That happens elsewhere in scripture, but not here. This is a righteous man who does not deserve what happens to him. And in this we find a clear rejection of a lie which has been told in every generation down through history right up to our own. There have always been people, some of them standing in front of churches like this one, insisting that if you live a life of obedience to God you will be healthy, wealthy and wise. Have you heard this claim? It's a lie. Sometimes, yes, suffering is self-inflicted. But there are other times when evil brings suffering into the lives of people who have done nothing to deserve such suffering. And just like the first reality, we may never be able to explain this second reality but we must acknowledge that it is true.

With these realities in mind, let's turn back then to Job and watch, along with all of heaven and hell, to see how this man named Hated One will respond to the suffering God has allowed the Accuser to inflict. Here is a man who has suffered in all the ways we suffer - losing his family, losing his health, losing his wealth. Will he now confirm the Accuser's claim that faith in God and unexplained suffering cannot, in fact, coexist?

Will he? In a word, no. Though Job's wife tells him that he should just curse God and die - thanks, honey, for the words of comfort! - Job refuses. "You speak as a foolish woman," he says. "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" And though he is severely tempted at times to do so, Job, in fact, never curses God. However, before you think he just takes it all in stride, Job doesn't curse God but neither does he just sit on his trash heap and sing God's praises.

Here is a man who has done his best to live faithfully before God. How now could this all have been allowed to happen? Job has no idea. And the more he asks the question the more he is filled with despair, at one point declaring, "The Lord

¹ I'm borrowing language from Eugene Peterson's *The Message* paraphrase of this text (Job 1:9-10).

² I Peter 5:8 puts this in stark terms.

breaks me down on every side, and I am gone, he has uprooted me like a tree. He has kindled his wrath against me, and counts me as his enemy.”³ Read through Job and chapter after chapter you will not hear him curse God, but you will hear him rail against God in anger, question God in doubt, and complain before God in agony. He holds nothing back, screaming things to God that many of us would never dare even to whisper in the presence of heaven.

And strangely enough, Job is a wonderful example for us in this. Because you see, when we suffer, especially when we suffer for no apparent reason, we, like Job, should feel free to bring our anger, our doubt, even our complaints to God. Why hide it, after all? God can see it anyway. Better to just honestly lay it bare before him. When I counsel people who face great hardship in life I rarely have reasons to give them for their suffering. I can’t explain their pain any more than they can. What I can offer them, however, is my encouragement to run, in the midst of their suffering, towards God. When you suffer in life, my prayer for you is that you will run towards God with your tears, run towards God with your clenched fist, run with your doubts and your questions, run in your stunned silence, run even with your hate if that’s what you carry inside. Run with whatever you have but just make sure you run towards God and not away from God, for once you run away from God you run away from hope and once hope is gone there’s nothing left.

In this, Job is our model in suffering. If you’ve read through his story, you know that Job continues his rant before God for 36 chapters, bringing everything before God but the curse the Accuser was hoping for. He never gives up his conviction that God ultimately is sovereign. He wonders how God can be good but he never denies God’s goodness. He struggles to see how God can be just but stops short of proclaiming God is unjust.

In the midst of his suffering, Job has some friends who come to him to try and help. Now, as some of you here know all too well, sometimes well-meaning friends are anything but helpful to us in the midst of hard times. That’s what happens with Job. His friends come around and do everything in their power to try and convince Job they know the reasons for his suffering and that they know what he can do to make it stop. As one writer put it, “suffering attracts fixers like road-kill attracts vultures.”⁴ Again, some of you know this all too well. You face hardship in your life and well-meaning friends show up to offer their spiritual diagnosis. “If you would only have done this or that God would not have allowed this to happen.” “You’ll see, God is working out a plan here and in the end you’ll understand.” “This is God’s will, you know. God’s going to use this hard time in your life to make you stronger. So keep your head up and hang in there!”

People will say these sorts of things to us when we suffer and, of course, there’s certainly some truth to what they say. Yes, there are many times when God does allow us to go through hardship so that we can grow and mature and develop in ways that ultimately benefit us and those around us. Pastor Tim Keller tells of the man in his church who was shot in the face during a drug deal gone bad. At the time he was an extremely cruel and selfish person who always blamed his constant legal and relational problems on others. When he lost his vision he was devastated, but he was also humbled, humbled to the point where years later he confessed, “As my physical eyes were closed my spiritual eyes were opened...I finally saw how I’d been treating people. I changed, and now for the first time in my life I have friends, real friends. It was a terrible price to pay, and yet I must say it was worth it. I finally have what makes life worthwhile.”⁵

In a similar way, many of us in this room can look back at times of hardship in our own lives and recognize that God used those times to shape and grow us in wonderful ways. Even so, at the moment we are actually going through suffering this reality rarely provides much consolation. As a pastor, I’m never going to stand at the graveside of a loved one you’ve just tragically lost and tell you that God is going to use your pain to grow and change you in wonderful ways. That’s likely true, but it’s not helpful in that moment. And so when we come alongside others in their suffering we ought not come with reasons for their suffering, however valid they may be, or advice on how to deal with their suffering, however practical it may be. As some of you know from experience, reasons and advice are rarely what people are looking for at these times.

Instead, perhaps our response to others who suffer should resemble God’s response to Job in his suffering. Job suffers and in response what does God do? For a long time God simply and patiently remains silent. God is present, present in the face of the pain, the doubt, the anger. He’s present but silent. This is what God does. In your own suffering, this is likely how you have experienced God. You suffer and God, at times, can seem painfully silent. But this should not surprise us. Neither should it shake our faith. For this is what God does. Even when we cry out to God from the deepest part of agony, God will often remain silent. He did with Job and he will with us. He even did so with his own

³ Job 19:10-11 (NRSV).

⁴ Eugene Peterson, *The Message*, (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), p. 719 (Job text notes).

⁵ As told by Tim Keller, *The Reason for God*, (New York: Dutton, 2008), 24-25.

Son. Remember? From the deepest part of his agony, as he suffered dying on the cross, Jesus cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.” This is the very Son of God crying out and even then the Father remains silent. We should not be surprised when the same happens to us.

But here’s the thing. Listen to me. God is often silent in the midst of our suffering but God will not remain silent forever. Even with Job, eventually God speaks. And when he does, it is Job’s turn to listen. In chapters 38-41, God delivers what might be the most gorgeous speech God ever delivers in the Old Testament. If you’ve never read it, go home today and read it. Mostly, it’s a speech full of questions. Job has asked his share of questions of God. Now God has a few questions of his own. Listen to a few of them.

“Who is this,” God asks Job, “that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?”⁶ “Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place?”⁷ “Where is the way to the place where the light is distributed, or where the east wind is scattered upon the earth?”⁸ “Who has put wisdom in the inward parts, or given understanding to the mind?”⁹ “Is it by your wisdom that the hawk soars, and spreads its wings towards the south? Is it by your command that the eagle mounts up and makes its nest on high?”¹⁰ “Will a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? Anyone who argues with God must respond.”¹¹

These are good questions. And what is Job going to say? What are we going to say to God when we ask us how it is we can demand reasons from him for what he has allowed to happen and not to happen? Just because we may not see the reasons God allows suffering and evil to be inflicted upon us in this life does that necessarily mean that there are not reasons, even good reasons? That’s the point of God’s questions. Is it possible that in this life God may see more than we see, know more than we know, be at work in ways we may never be able to understand?

Job responds to these questions as we also ought to respond, in humility. “Who am I that I should answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but will proceed no further.”¹² At the end of the day this is Job’s humble prayer in response to suffering. It is a prayer which God accepts. For though Job struggled mightily to trust God, Job never cursed God. In his anger and questions and doubt he never ran from God but always ran towards God. At one point, in fact, in one of the most beautiful passages in the whole book, Job utters these words of stunning hope in the midst of his unexplainable suffering,

**For I know that my Redeemer lives,
and that at the last he will stand
upon the earth;
and after my skin has been thus destroyed
then in my flesh I shall see God,
whom I shall see on my side,
and my eyes shall behold, and not another.
My heart faints within me!**¹³

You see, in the end the Accuser was wrong, just as the Accuser is always wrong. Faith can coexist with suffering, as it can also coexist with anger, and doubt, and despair, and mystery. In fact, faith never exists without these things. And for those who hold on in faith, those who trust God even when they cannot understand God, they will live to see a day when such faith will not disappoint.

Here is a great and timeless truth I really hope you will understand. Listen closely. The Christian faith may not always give us answers for suffering. What it does always give, however, are the resources which enable us to endure suffering with hope and courage. You see, all people in the world, people of all faiths struggle with the reality of suffering in this world which God allows for reasons we cannot understand or explain. It is Christianity alone among the world’s faiths,

⁶ Job 38:2-4 (NRSV).

⁷ Job 38:12 (NRSV).

⁸ Job 38:24 (NRSV).

⁹ Job 38:36 (NRSV).

¹⁰ Job 39:26-27 (NRSV).

¹¹ Job 40:2 (NRSV).

¹² Job 40:4-5 (paraphrase of the NRSV).

¹³ Job 19:25-27 (NRSV).

however, which proclaims that the God of the universe who allows human suffering is not distant from that suffering but has entered fully into that suffering with us.

In Christ, the eternal God of the universe took on human flesh and lived in this world and fully exposed himself firsthand to every disappointment, betrayal, loneliness, heartache and loss which we might ever experience. In the end, when Jesus gave his life on the cross, placing himself as an object of condemnation before a Father he had known and loved intimately for all eternity, he suffered in ways that infinitely exceed any suffering we will ever know. And Christ did this not only to identify with us in our suffering but so that he could lead us out of it in the end.

Though Job certainly couldn't have understood exactly how this would come about one day, he did believe that it would. He believed, as I pray you believe, that his Redeemer lived! He believed that at the last his Redeemer would stand upon this earth, as we know he did stand upon this earth. He believed that even after death took his life, even after his skin was destroyed, that in his flesh he would one day see God and on that day he would see that God was not against him but was on his side. This is what Job believed. He may not have had answers or reasons. He may have been full of questions, and doubts, and pain, and anger. But through it all he never cursed God and he never abandoned hope.

We gather every Sunday morning in this community because it was on a Sunday morning long ago when the most tragic and unexplainable suffering in the history of the world, the death and abandonment of the very Son of God on the cross, was overcome and undone in an empty tomb. The resurrection of Christ lit the fuse on God's rescue mission to put an end to all suffering and all death once and for all. The promise of the resurrection is that all those who suffer in this life but run towards Christ and not away from Christ will one day be themselves caught up in that resurrection which leads to a life where suffering will have no place.

Just after the climax of the trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*, Sam Gamgee, a simple hobbit who never gives up hope, discovers that his friend Gandalf the Wizard is not dead as he thought but is, after all, alive. "I thought you were dead!" he cries out. "But then I thought I was dead myself! Is everything sad going to come untrue?"¹⁴

What a great question. In Christ, the answer is yes. In Christ everything sad, every suffering we ever endure, even death, is someday going to come untrue. At the last, this is our hope. We know that our Redeemer lives!

Amen.



The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Job 1:1-22. What sticks out to you here?
2. What would God give the Accuser (aka, the devil) permission to do what he does to Job? Can we ever come up with a good answer to this question?
3. God does not cause or initiate evil but does allow evil. Do agree with this statement?
4. Why does God so often seem so silent at times we are suffering? Have you ever experienced this personally? What could be the reason?
5. What effect has suffering, either your own suffering or the suffering of others, had on your faith? Can you be specific?
6. Jesus, the Son of God, suffered more than any of us will ever come close to suffering. What does this mean to you?
7. When people around you suffer, what do they most need from you? When you have suffered, who has been the most help to you? What did they offer?

¹⁴ Illustration borrowed from Tim Keller, *Reason for God*, p. 33.

C.S. Lewis once wrote, "They say of some temporal suffering, 'No future can make up for it,' not knowing that Heaven, once attained, will work backwards and turn even that agony into glory." Do you believe this is true? Will the resurrection eventually make everything sad come untrue in the end?