



JOB'S FIRST TEST

Text: Job 1

By: Rev Dr Leo Douma

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When I did my Master's thesis in psychology it was based on what's called the Attribution Theory. The theory says that we human beings need to be able to attribute a cause for why things happen. Especially if we suffer. We want to know why. The idea that things could just happen randomly is very unsettling. So, we will make up a reason rather than leave it unanswered. Job is the Old Testament book about suffering. As if that is not bad enough Job seems to suffer for no good reason. The book makes it clear that our main character is a very good man of God. But he suffers more than most of us ever will. When his friends come to comfort him, he tells them of his struggles with what God is doing to him. But his friends are strong believers in a cause-and-effect theology. If you suffer there must be a reason. Namely, you must have done something wrong and God is punishing you. So, they keep telling him to confess his sin. But Job knows there is nothing like that in his life. So, he demands a response from God. Why is he suffering? Eventually God does respond. He displays his awesome power in creation and providence. Job responds by realizing how puny he is in comparison to God and he deeply humbles himself. In terms of cause and effect God's answer is no answer. He doesn't explain himself. And yet it is the answer. Trust God and keep the faith. In the end, this book of Job is not so much about suffering as it is about faith. It's about knowing God for who he really is and worshipping him totally. The book is 42 chapters long. Most of it is long speeches between Job and his three friends as they argue back and forth. The speeches are in poetic form and much of it is very majestic and deep in its language. But not everything said in the speeches should be taken as correct. Many things said by the three friends is based on a wrong theology. You cannot just chose a verse here and there and preach on it. You really need to read the book as a whole to get the impact of what's going on. The book

starts with two chapters of prose prologue that sets the scene for the speeches. It's the first chapter of this introduction that I want to deal with this morning.

The book opens with the words (:1) "*In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job*". We don't know where Uz was. Or anything about Job apart from what's in this book, expect that he was in the time of Abraham. The book is one of the oldest in the Bible. Without a genealogy like other Bible characters have, Job just steps on the scene and goes again. He is in a sense 'every man', one of us. His story could be anyone's story. Now the writer makes it clear, from the outset, just how good a man Job was. (:1) "*This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil.*" The writer is not saying Job was perfect. We all know every human is a sinner. But this man truly loved God and did his utmost to do the right thing. It is not for nothing that the book commences with this description of Job. This is the key point. A truly good and wise person is suffering. Not an evil person creating their own havoc. God had blessed this deeply pious man very richly. He had a large family and was enormously wealthy (:3) "*seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen...*". He was a pastoralist with all his sheep. A huge trader using all those camels for the trade caravans. He was an agriculturalist, farming large tracts of land. A stud breeder, a boss over a vast number of servants. (:3) "*He was the greatest man among all the people of the east.*"

Job was also blessed with a wonderful and close family. They all loved to get together as often as they could. It was Job's custom of offering a burnt offering after each time they got together. The impression is not that they were riotous and drunk. They were good people. But Job, being a very pious man, prayed often for his family. He offered the general sacrifice for sin, just in case they (:5) "*sinned and cursed God in their hearts.*" Here is another hint into the character of Job. He was always careful never to "*curse God*". He would never think little of God or doubt him. This cursing of God we will see will come up as a key issue.

Now, from verse 6-12 we have a change in scene. We move from the earth to heaven. Having given us clues about Job, the writer now gives us insight into the spiritual realms unseen on the earth. This is background stuff that Job is not privy to. We see a meeting in heaven between God and his angels. They come to report on their activities. One of those presenting himself is "*the Satan*" which can be translated the

'accuser'. He is the trouble maker. We see that God draws Satan's attention to Job (:8) *"Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil."* Note how it's the same language as verse 1. In other words God himself makes clear how faithful and obedient Job is. He is God's *"servant"*. There are few in the Bible who received that title. Jesus, God's son being one of them. In Ezekiel, we read of Job being listed as one of the three greatest men in the Old Testament. Satan, the accuser, loved to point out the miserable failure of so many human beings. But God points out that Job is one who is truly a servant of God. He is one that God himself delights in and can hold up as a wonderful example.

But Satan is very cynical, and very knowing of human failure. In effect he says to God, 'Get real. He only does all of that because of what you give him'. (:9) *"Does Job fear God for nothing?"* 'Does Job worship you just because he loves you? Look at his vast fortune, all his great kids, his great standing in the community. Of course he worships you. He knows what side his bread is buttered. But what if you take it all away? Will he still love you and serve you. (:11) *"Stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to his face."* Now here is the central issue. Why do we worship God? So we can be well off? Serve God and he will bless us? Why do you serve God? So he will look after you, so you can go to heaven? Why do you go to church, to feel good? Why do you love God, simply for who he is? If God takes away all you have, will you still love him? Will you get angry with him, feel robbed, feel cheated? Will you then curse him because he has not provided what you expected? Satan has the finger right on the pulse. Here is the test. Do you truly want a deep personal relationship with God, and him alone? Or is yours a friendship for what you can get? So often deep suffering tests this very point. Often suffering brings us closer to God because it forces us to cling to him and not his gifts.

How does God respond to this cynicism of the Satan, this accusation against his servant Job? (:12) *"The Lord said to Satan "Very well, then, everything he has is in your hands, but on the man himself do not lay a finger."* Is this some sort of bet, a wager as some commentators call it? Is this God and the spiritual realms playing bets using human lives as a spawns? Not at all! God has full confidence in his servant. He doesn't need to find out if Job is up to it, or play games with Satan. God will demonstrate to 'the Accuser' that not all human beings are rebellious sinners like Satan. Not all human

beings are just in it for themselves. There are those who bear witness to their great love for God. And in doing so bring great honour and glory for God. The one who did that the greatest was Jesus, God's own Son. He really was God's servant who obeyed all the way to the cross. Often there is no earthly explanation for suffering. But it makes sense from the spiritual side. It's about Satan being silenced. It's about the power of evil being overcome by the faithfulness of God's servants. One of the key lessons we see in this scene in heaven is that it is God who is sovereign. He is in complete control. The devil is powerful, but still subservient to God. Too often the struggle between good and evil, between God and the devil is seen as if they are two equal warring partners. But they are not. The devil may roar like a lion, but he is a lion on a chain. He can go only so far as God allows. As God says: "*on the man himself do not lay a finger.*" There is only one master of this world and he has complete control.

Now in verse 13 the scene shifts again. Now we are back on earth. We are back with Job and his family, his land and possessions. Job has no idea of what has been decided in heaven. Only we as readers are privy to the true nature of what's going on. This is essential to appreciate what's going on when we get to the long speeches. Job and his friends are not privy to the discussion in heaven. In verse 13 all is happy and tranquil. The family is together again enjoying another fine time, even sipping the wine. That's when all hell breaks loose and tragedy rips this scene apart. So often that's how it goes doesn't it? All seems so well when out of the blue comes the heart attack. The trip was so enjoyable when the car smash destroys everything. Job on this day gets one sledge hammer blow after another. One messenger after another tells of all his possessions being taken or killed. And then the most devastating, heart rending news that all his kids have been killed in one go. We know what it is to hear bad news. We know the agony, the cry that rips from our lungs. We have all suffered, but surely not to the extent of Job on this day. There are just no words to describe Job's loss. We are stunned into silence as we see Job at this moment. And all of heaven waits. How does he respond? Will Job in his agony cry out against God and curse him for this suffering, for this evil against him and his family.

(:20-22) "*At this Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said: 'Naked I came from my mother's womb/ and naked I will depart./ The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away;/ may the Name of the Lord be praised.'* In all this Job did not sin by charging God of wrong doing." The tearing of the

robe, the shaving of the head was the typical Middle Eastern way to express grief. That we expect. But note the next line: *"Then he fell to the ground in worship."* He did not curse God to his face as Satan predicted. He does not cry out 'Why God?' He worships God. In his grief he clings to God. He embraces God. And as he does so, he recognizes who God is: the majestic- Lord of all. We have no rights before God. We have no life and independence before God. We are utterly dependent on what God's hand gives. He has complete right to determine our lives. We are born naked, we will leave naked. The Lord can give and he can take away. Job does not just love God for what God gives. He loves God for who he is in himself. And in so doing Job recognizes the awesome majesty and sovereignty of God. You notice that Job doesn't blame secondary causes. He doesn't have a go at the devil or the Sabeans or Chaldean raiding parties. In his deep faith he sees all things coming from God. And that God has every right to give and provide or to take and remove as he pleases. He is God. He is Lord. What an awesome witness. What an awesome display of obedience to God. The only display more profound than this was that of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. As the terror of hell nearly overwhelmed him, and he prayed: *"Not my will but yours be done."*

In this first test, Job is truly a great witness for God. Here was a man who trusted God even without knowing all we know about God's love shown in Jesus. Sometimes in our own suffering we may have doubts. But then we look at the cross of Christ and see Jesus suffering. We know that God's deep love for us is displayed in that ultimate sacrifice of his son for our sin. But Job didn't know all that about Jesus. In a sense, he was a type of Christ, clinging on to God in worship even in the midst of his deepest suffering as Jesus did in hell. In the next weeks we will see more of Job's struggle. And what a struggle it is. This is not the whole picture here. But we are left with the question. Why do you worship God? Because of all the good he gives you? Or simply for who he is as the complete Lord of all. Will you love him in your struggle and pain? Will you acknowledge his right to have his way with you? What witness do you provide for the glory of God? You might say 'Be gentle on me, God hasn't finished his work with me. I'm not sure I'm up to that level of faith yet'. That's OK, Job still needed much to learn. But we will see that in the coming weeks.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

These questions can be followed up personally, with a Christian friend, in your small groups, or in discussion after the service. Reflection is important because too often we hear a good sermon and soon forget it without actually growing spiritually or changing in attitude or what we do. The reflection questions are meant to be challenging, because our spiritual growth and the salvation of others is so important.

- What does chapter 1 say about Job's character & faith? Is this proven at the end of the chapter? What might a testing of your faith reveal? Where do you see a need for spiritual growth in your life?
- Why do you worship God? Is it simply to relate with God and worship him for who he is? Or is it to receive his blessings?
- Have you struggled with the question of suffering, wanting to know the reason/cause for things? Why not read the whole of Job in your devotions and see what it says?