

March 12, 2006

Job—Blameless Sufferer, Honest Struggler, Earnest Missionary to his Gentile Friends  
Matthew 28:16-20 / Acts 17:16-31 / Job 4:1-21

This being the weekend of our Annual Missionary Conference, I was asked to speak on the TOPIC OF MISSIONS—to which I gladly complied! After majoring in missions at Gordon-Conwell, and having served on two foreign mission fields, missions is a topic very close to my heart!

At first, I thought I would have to deviate from my trek through Job in order to preach on missions, because like most people, I perceived Job to be a book about suffering, and not missions. Meaning my first inclination was to go instead to a text that was more OVERTLY missions oriented—like our text from Matthew 28, or our other text from Acts 17—two of the most commonly chosen texts for people speaking on the need to support, pray for, give to, or get involved in actually doing the work of missions.

But the more I contemplated which text to speak from, the more I realized there was no need to venture away from Job at all! For here in these verses, and in this ongoing dialogue with Job's three friends, we find a thoroughly "missions oriented" text!

- 1.) Not a text on the REASON for world missions, as found in Genesis 12, Isaiah 54 and 56, or Matthew 24:14.
- 2.) Nor a text on the FACT that world missions would become a future reality and the primary focus of the early church after they received the Spirit, as in Luke 24:47.
- 3.) Not a text COMMISSIONING all believers everywhere to carry out world missions in every place, and in every age, until disciples have been made in every people group on the face of the earth, as in Matthew 28:16-20!
- 4.) Nor even a text on the glorious RESULT, or the bountiful HARVEST that world missionary labors will bear, as we are shown in Revelation 7:9, where we get to see that on the Last Day, "people from every tribe and nation and people and language will stand before the throne, dressed in white robes (that is, in the righteousness of Christ!) praising the Lamb who was slain"—the fruit of over 2000 years of missionary labor!

Job contains no such texts. But what we do find in Job, starting in Chapter 2 verse 11 and going clear through to Chapter 42 verse 10, is clearly the work of world missions being done!

NOT in the sense of Job crossing land and sea to GO to people of other nations, but in the sense of people from other nations coming to Job—similar to what’s happening here in the States, where people from all over the globe are emigrating here to the states, or coming into our own back yards (so to speak) as high school exchange students, or for a college education—Hindu’s and Buddhists, and Muslims and Secularists and Animists and Sikhs and a multitude of others—an often neglected mission field in our own backyards!

For those, who, unlike Steve and Pam, CAN’T go on the mission field, God has graciously brought the mission field to us! Thousands upon thousands of young people every year coming here! And what an opportunity it is! Think of it—to be able to do missions abroad and at home at the same time! And we must do BOTH—because the stated will of God for His people is that they develop a heart for, and sacrifice to support, and do all they can to further the cause of missions—which in it’s most basic sense, is reaching all peoples from all cultures with the Good News of God’s grace in Jesus Christ.

*“This is what is written,” says Luke, ‘ The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins WILL BE PREACHED in His name to all nations, starting in Jerusalem.’ ”*

**Missions is not an “optional extra” for churches!** In fact, it’s been part of God’s stated will for His people clear back to the beginning of the book of Genesis—which is why I didn’t have to pick a NT text to speak on missions!

OT saints were admonished to be “a light to the Gentiles” (Isaiah 42 and 49:6). From the very beginning God’s purpose was to choose a people for himself, and bless that people, that they in turn might “be a blessing, and that all nations might be blessed through them” (Gen. 12:1-3).

God’s intended purpose has always been, “That the earth be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (Habakkuk 2:14). And that goal will never change! In fact, that’s what we pray for each time we say: “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

Even at the Dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem, Solomon prayed:

“As for the foreigner who does not belong to your people Israel, but has come from afar because of Your name... when he comes and prays... then hear from heaven... and do whatever the foreigner asks of You, so that all the peoples of the earth may know Your name and fear You, as do your own people.” (I Kings 8:41-43)

You can just hear the missionary intent of all those passages—people needing to hear about God’s great name, and see His glory, and know of His righteousness, and experience His grace and mercy as He answers their prayers and forgives their sin.

It was a fact that struck me again this Thursday when I received a Missionary Newsletter from a friend in Honduras working up in a remote village in the mountains. He asked one lady if she would like him to pray with her, and she turned him down. So did another and another. And soon he discovered it was because they didn’t know what prayer was! What an opportunity to share about the person and power of God!

Like Solomon we should cry out, “When the foreigner comes and prays (or we pray for them) hear from heaven and do whatever they ask, so that all the peoples of the earth might know your name and fear you.”

And we find that same missionary desire, and missionary heart in Job. As Mike Mason so aptly points out:

*“The precise location of the Temanite, Shuhite and Naamathite territories is uncertain, but it does seem clear that Job’s friends came from some distance away. Almost like a miniature of the United Nations, they appear to have represented a cross-section of the various ethnic groupings of the ancient Near East, and this serves to remind us that in the ancient world, the practice of monotheism was by no means confined to the Israelites. Just as Job’s friends represented Gentile nations, they also represented Gentile religion—and NOT the run-of-the-mill pagan variety, but rather, a very pure and sophisticated brand of moral monotheism....Did these men truly know the same God Job knew? In some ways this is the central question of the next 40 chapters, and is not at all an easy one to answer. In any case, whatever Job’s friends may have believed at the outset of their journey, the Epilogue makes it clear that by the end they were soundly converted (or else corrected and restored) to living faith in the God of Job (42:7-9)... And so it is possible to interpret Job as being essentially a book about the action of grace among Gentiles. This is a story of how revival breaks out because of the faith of one person, because of the suffering of one person, because one person has been humbled before the Lord. What power there is in the sacrifice of one righteous, broken and penitent heart.”*

He’s right. Too many people fail to see the missionary implications of this book—the persistent efforts of a suffering and struggling believer to bring his friends—his highly religious, morally conservative, spiritual inquisitive, intellectually sophisticated, and fairly wise foreign friends—to a more adequate (or saving) knowledge of God.

These were religious yet still un-converted Gentiles. And at least one of Job's purposes is to evangelize them through his verbal dialogue—to correct their terribly flawed and inadequate knowledge of God.

It's what we could call friendship evangelism—four friends (three of mostly non-biblical persuasion) trying to come to grips with what God is TRULY like—verbally slugging it out (so to speak) for 36 chapters(!)—until we read at the very end of the book, that the stated RESULT of it all, is the CONVERSION of Job's three friends! (Chapter 42:7-10)

You see, because the suffering of Job so dominates the attention of most readers, they can tend to forget that Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar are **FOREIGNERS**, who do little more than advance ideas common to almost all strains of middle-eastern monotheism:

They believe in one God, who is all-powerful / executes justice / judges people for their wrongdoings / and functions on the basis of works or merit. Their beliefs are more akin to Islam, or Generic Moral Theism, than the revelation of God found in the Bible.

They are Traditional Generic God-fearers who tend to use the deity to enforce conservative social morality, but have yet to understand or experience God as a God of grace—slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

I know the type well, because until about 4 years ago my DAD was one of them! All his life he believed in God. / Believed all people should be moral, and do their best to work for the betterment of society. / Believed that people should respect God, go to church (which he did every Sunday for as long as I can remember!), help their neighbor, give to those in need, and respect the environment. He even believed that God would punish evildoers (at least the bad ones, like Hitler or Stalin or Bin laden)!

He was what I call a Generic God-Fearer, who like many of the writers of the American Constitution, felt that "religion in general (regardless of the brand) was good for the moral fabric and cohesiveness of society!"

But he didn't believe the Gospel, and he didn't believe in Jesus, and he didn't understand, or experience the saving grace of God—until 4 YEARS AGO when at 78 years old, he was converted to Christ and baptized!

MOST PEOPLE would have SAID he was a Christian: He was married to a very devout one / was one of the most moral men I know / went to church almost every Sunday / put his money in the plate / donated his time / worked on committees / sang in the choir / helped out at church suppers!

But by his own profession, he was NOT a believer. He was merely a moral theist who believed there were personal and social advantages to supporting religion—sort of like Job’s friends who were also—unconverted God-fearers who had yet to experience the saving grace of God.

So, in light of all that, what does this passage have to tell us about MISSIONS?

**FIRST**, it tells us that missionaries are NOT usually sent to evangelize atheists! They don’t go to evangelize people who have NO knowledge of God, or NO established belief systems about God, or NO grasp of truth whatsoever!

Not at all! Studies have persistently shown that upwards of 97 to 98% of all the people in the world adhere to some basic belief in a Divine Being. The atheist is the rare exception to the rule! And many (just like Job’s friends), believe some very commendable and even biblically accurate thoughts about Him.

As both Job, and Paul in Acts 17 point out, many un-evangelized people have very complex theological beliefs about God—and some of their beliefs are very accurate and true! In fact, according to Paul, the problem wasn’t that the Athenians didn’t believe in God, it was that their beliefs about God were so lacking, that they weren’t sure how to go about knowing the God they knew existed!

“Men of Athens,” Paul says, “I can see that in every way you are very religious, for as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship I even found an altar with this inscription: To An Unknown God. And what you worship as unknown I am going to proclaim to you.”

In other words, you do believe in God, it’s just that your knowledge of Him is inadequate and lacking. Paul even tells them in verse 28, “As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are His offspring.’” In other words, “Some of your own Greek poets have correctly discerned that God is the Creator who has made us in His image—we ARE indeed His offspring—as far as that goes you’re exactly right!” And not only does he quote them, but he actually uses that quote from them as his jumping off point for sharing the Gospel!

**And NOTICE:** Paul doesn't say, "Everything you believe about God is wrong and therefore to become a Christian you have to trash it all!" He says, "You know that God you ALREADY believe in? I'm going to tell you more about Him! I'm going to FILL IN ALL THE BLANKS so that He's no longer an UNKNOWN GOD!"

You see, whatever else these Greek poets may have believed about God, at least on this point they had rightly and unquestionably discerned correct TRUTH about God! And using that one point of common ground, Paul goes on to inform them of the areas where their beliefs about God were lacking! Not trouncing everything they believed (because some of it was good and true), but rather, AFFIRMING what they believed when it was true, and CORRECTING what they believed (or the conclusions they drew from what they believed) when it was false or distorted!

Job does it, and Paul does it. It's an evangelistic strategy used in both the Old and New Testaments!

Which brings us to our **SECOND** point. No matter when a missionary arrives on the scene, God's primary, first-line, advance team missionary has already been there before them! And because of it, every people group has already received some basic instruction about God!

For instance, the Bible says, "the HEAVENS declare the glory of God"—His righteousness, and wisdom and understanding (Psalms 19, 50, 97, and Proverbs 3). The CREATION IN GENERAL, we are told, declares His power and divine nature (Rom. 1:20).

The fact that God created man in His image and has written his law on every human heart means every people will hold to some or many godly virtues (Rom. 2:12-15). God has even placed a yearning for eternal life in the hearts of people. As Ecclesiastes 3:11 puts it, "He has set eternity in the hearts of men."

The Bible begins, and goes straight through to the end, resting on the foundational assumption that EVERYONE ALREADY believes in God (everyone except the fool, that is, who denies or represses the evidence he sees and feels)! "In the beginning GOD created..." says Genesis 1:1! No bantering back and forth about evidence, or probabilities or statistics. The creation is enough! Only the fool (says both Psalms and Proverbs) can look at the created order and deny the existence of God!

Which means the Bible is NOT the SOLE source of knowledge about God!!!! “The heavens,” says David in Psalm 19, “declare the glory of God, and the skies proclaim the work of His hands. Day after day they pour forth speech, night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.”

The creation, David is saying, is God’s Never-Silent Front-Line Missionary Evangelist, who knows every language, and proclaims without hesitation or interruption (day after endless day, and night after endless night), all over the earth, that God is glorious, wise and powerful! That’s why Paul could say that, “God’s invisible qualities—His eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen through what has been made, so that all men are without excuse.”

It’s what the theologians call “**GENERAL REVELATION.**” The revelation God makes known about Himself through what He has made. But as we know from Scripture, General Revelation is not enough to save a person. It IS ENOUGH to convince people that God is glorious, and powerful, and wise, and righteous! And “His law written on the human heart” is enough to convince people what’s morally right and wrong and convict their consciences when they violate that law.

But it’s NOT ENOUGH to tell them how to get right with God, or get their sins forgiven, or purge their consciences of guilt, or stand in the presence of that righteous and powerful Creator (who has written His moral code on their hearts), and do so as one who has been declared NOT GUILTY! One who has been PARDONED, RECONCILED, and MADE ACCEPTABLE to God.

In other words, like the OT law (the revelation from creation and the law written on the heart), ARE enough to convict and condemn a person, but they ARE NOT ENOUGH to SAVE or GIVE LIFE to a person! For that one must receive a more SPECIFIC and DETAILED “**SPECIAL REVELATION.**” They must have the Gospel of God’s Grace and Forgiveness in Christ preached to them!

You see, the Gentiles believed in God! Job makes that clear, and Paul made that even clearer in Acts 17! But the Bible doesn’t ask anyone if they “believe in God!” It assumes everyone already does!

The question it asks (and upon which one’s salvation hinges) is this: *Do you believe in JESUS? That He is God’s ONLY BEGOTTEN SON who died on the cross in the place of guilty sinners, so*

*that all who call upon Him might be saved!!! "You believe in God," says Jesus, (that's a given!) "believe also in ME."*

And it's precisely because people CAN'T learn those truths from the revelation of God in creation that missionaries MUST GO, and TAKE THE GOSPEL to people who only know HALF the story! The NON-REDEMPTIVE half! We must provide the saving knowledge they lack and could never discern from creation alone!

Because the CURSE has distorted the revelation of God in creation, and because SIN has twisted our urges and passions, and darkened our hearts and thoughts, our ethical choices and perceptions of God are distorted and lacking.

Thus, although Job's friends did believe that God was righteous (v. 17); that man was sinful (v. 18); that God is all-powerful and sovereign (v. 9 and 19); that He judges the sins of men, and punishes them severely whenever they do wrong (vv. 8, 9, 19, 20 and 21), there is a distinct lack of any significant understanding of God's grace, long-suffering, patience, faithfulness, and mercy! It's almost totally lacking.

Which brings us to our LAST point. Because their knowledge of God is so lacking, they are not able to discern between God's Spirit, and deceiving spirits, and therefore draw the wrong conclusions. Eliphaz is obviously a mystic. But the experience he describes in verses 12-21 is more akin to a satanic séance, than any true experience with God. He is obviously open to spiritual things, but because His knowledge of God is so inadequate, he has trouble understanding the nature of evil, and how it works.

"A word was secretly brought to me," he says, "my ears caught a whisper of it. Amid disquieting dreams in the night, when deep sleep falls upon men, fear and trembling seized me and made all my bones shake. A spirit glided past my face and the hair on my body stood on end. It stopped, but I could not tell what it was."

What should he have done at that point? He should have asked God to rebuke it! But he doesn't. His inadequate understanding of God causes him to lack such spiritual discernment! Because this isn't an angel, it's a demon! A deceiving spirit!

"A form stood before my eyes," he says, "and I heard a hushed voice say: "Can a mortal be more righteous than God? Can a man be more pure than his Maker? If God places no trust in his servants, if he charges his angels with error (obviously inferring he is not one!) how much

more those who live in houses of clay, whose foundations are in the dust, who are crushed more readily than a moth! Between dawn and dusk they are broken to pieces, unnoticed they perish forever.”

Mike Mason is right again when he says:

“What a chilling passage this is! Just to read it is enough to send shivers down the spine...Eliphaz very probably committed the heinous—yet all too common—error of mistaking an evil spirit for the Spirit of the Lord, and moreover, repeating the words of a demon as if they were those of God Himself... Like everything originating with the Devil, [these] words have a good deal of truth to them... his normal method of working is simply to give the truth a subtle twist, a slight bend, refashioning and redirecting it for his own purposes. The more closely lies and perversions resemble the truth, the more likely people are to fall for them... (Here) Eliphaz falls for two of Satan’s classic methods of perverting truth: exaggeration and put-down... To suggest that no one can be more righteous and more pure than God is both entirely obvious and entirely irrelevant—since no one is claiming that!”

And to believe that because man is sinful, he is worthless, and goes unnoticed—(to be broken in pieces, and crushed like a moth), is to accept an outright Satanic lie. “Eliphaz’s real problem, says Mason, (that is, the reason he believes this lying spirit) as is the case with all those who buy into a mean-spirited theology, is that he has an inferiority complex regarding his humanity. He has a dismally low view of man, and therefore a dismally low view of God and His grace.”

And LISTEN: If Job were to heed this advice, not only would there be NO reason for him to have hope, there would also be NO reason for anyone to engage in missions! If people are unnoticed and insignificant to God, as this deceiving spirit implies, then there is no need to waste our time or our lives seeking their salvation!

I mean it is true that man is a sinner—radically corrupted by sin! The demon got that much right! But he left out the other half of the story—the Gospel half—that sinful as man is, he is STILL the bearer of the divine image, created by God, loved by God, and precious to God—the crown of his creation, and the object of His affectionate love. As Psalm 8 puts it, “You made him a little lower than the angels” (or stunningly in the Hebrew, ‘a little lower than ‘Elohim’— God)

Sinful as we are, we matter to God! Corrupt as sinners are, God loves sinners! So much, that He sent His Son to redeem them from the POWER and PENALTY of sin!

Had Eliphaz known the true God, he would have known that! But he didn't! Nor do millions of others like him all over the world! Which is why we must never stop doing MISSIONS! Those seemingly insignificant herd boys living in the Mountains of Lesotho—they matter to God!

Those tribes on the other side of the lake from the Rabenolds; those Muslims that the Gillettes are reaching out to in India; those people the Lears are working with in Ghana; those people in Kensington in the marginal areas of Philly—God loves them, sent His son to die for them, and commissions us to tell them (and millions like them) that saving message!