

January 29, 2006
 Accepting Evil From God—The Ultimate Struggle of Faith
 Isaiah 45:1-7 / Amos 3:1-6 / Job 2:1-10

In today's text we are hit with one of the most difficult issues we will have to struggle with in the whole Book of Job—or in the whole Bible for that matter. In fact, it's an issue that's not only difficult, it's very controversial as well. And thus I tell you ahead of time that some of you may struggle with what I have to say this morning. You may already have done that, merely by reading my sermon title and saying to yourself, "Wait a minute—we don't have to accept evil from God. God is holy and has NOTHING TO DO with the evil that confronts us."

But of course, that's why it's so controversial: Because although that *IS* what we often think, and even what we've often been taught, Job says otherwise.

Thus, all I ask of you is this: that you'll simply offer me the courtesy of a listening ear, and out of Christian charity, a willingness to at least consider that what I'm about to share regarding God's relationship to evil is not only TRUE TO THIS TEXT, but also finds support in MANY OTHER TEXTS of the Bible as well.

As I've often told my congregations in my 20 years as a pastor, "You don't have to agree with everything I say—obviously! (I'm not God and I'm not the Pope!) But please know that I have done my homework, and even moreso, that as an expository preacher I would not say ANYTHING I didn't first find some biblical justification for saying.

That's especially true in regard to my message for today, where we will be dealing with Job's statement that, *"we must accept EVIL from God, as well as the GOOD that He sends our way."*

And, of course, depending on the version you're using, some of you are probably saying, "What is he talking about? Where does he even see the word EVIL in this text?" And so, in keeping with the promise I made to you on the day we put the NIV Bibles in the pews (that I would point out the errors in that translation when I came across them), I need to tell you that verse 10 is poorly translated.

The Hebrew word which the NIV translates *"trouble"* in verse 10, is more of a subjective interpretation than a literal translation. Because the Hebrew word used there is the word *"ra"* and *"ra"* is almost universally translated evil—plain and simple. In fact, it's the same exact word that the NIV DOES translate "evil" in chapter 1, verse 8 and chapter 2, verse 3, where Job is said to be a man who "shuns EVIL."

And it's not just the NIV. The NASB and the New King James are not much better when they translate "ra" as "adversity." And the Living Bible is worst of all, rendering "ra" as a mere "unpleasantness." (Whatever that means! A cold shower?!)

That's NOT what the verse says or means! The word used there is "ra" and "ra" is literally "evil" as the KJV, RSV, ESV, and NEB rightly point out! The literal translation, therefore, would be, "Shall we accept (or receive) GOOD from God, and not EVIL." Both come our way, says Job, "FROM GOD," who, as we saw last week, sovereignly determines ALL that comes to pass!

THAT, in summary, is Job's response to his wife, who when she sees the intensity of the sufferings her husband is experiencing, seeks to persuade him that death would be preferable to enduring what he's enduring and thus encourages him to "curse God and die."

Which brings us to our **FIRST** point—actually our first example of what I referred to as "Foil material" in my first message on Job. And foil material, as I mentioned then, is a biblical statement that we are NOT supposed to believe!

You see, what Job's wife is really saying is that God is a tit for tat, vengeful God, who would strike Job dead on the spot if he verbally cursed God for allowing the things that have happened to happen. And by "curse" she means audibly malign God's character.

What she's basically saying is this, "Come on Job, you're suffering so intensely, just curse God and get it over with! Tell Him that He's UNFAIR, that HE'S UNJUST, that HE'S JUST PLAIN WRONG to let you suffer this way, and He'll immediately KILL YOU FOR IT, and then you'll at least be delivered from the physical agony and excruciating pain you're now suffering."

But is that true? Would God "strike Job dead on the spot" for saying such things? Or is her concept of God a bit warped? Is God indeed the way she suggests He is? ***I BELIEVE NOT!*** And I'm NOT saying we should ever flippantly or irreverently curse God or publicly malign His character, for the Bible makes it clear we are to fear Him and reverence Him, not malign His Name.

But you know what? We malign His name all the time! Every time we complain to someone about our circumstances / or say that it's not fair that we should suffer in ways that others don't / or get angry with the way things have turned out—every time we do any of those things, we are ultimately questioning God's wisdom, criticizing His sovereign oversight of our lives, or

telling Him we think He did things wrong, or in an unjust way—that we (essentially) could have done it better. We do it all the time, often without even realizing that we are.

Remember what I said last week? That all anger is ultimately anger toward God, and all our discontent is ultimately discontent with the way God has done things? And if we concede that fact (which I do believe to be true), is not the verbalization of that DISCONTENT a way of publicly calling into question God's infinite wisdom, goodness and righteousness? It sure is! And I'm no exception. I've fallen into doing it myself on many occasions—often unaware that that is exactly what I was doing.

Yet, my question to you is this: When we do so (and I believe most of us have done so more than we know) does God strike us dead on the spot? NO! Thanks be to God He does not! (The fact that you or I are even alive, and here this day, is sufficient proof that God DOES NOT respond that way with His children.

And again, it's not that He wouldn't be perfectly justified in doing so! He would! But He doesn't, because contrary to the opinion of Job's WIFE, God is NOT a tit for tat vengeful God. He's a holy yet merciful God, who as scripture tells us repeatedly, is slow to anger and does not treat us as our sins deserve. If He did we'd all be dead!

But even moreso, the reason God doesn't strike us dead on the spot is because Someone else already died in our place for that sin! Christ already bore in His body, and absorbed in His person, ALL God's righteous wrath against ALL OUR SINS—including our frequent sin of maligning His character by our complaining.

Thank God for Jesus. That's all I can say — thank God for Jesus who drank up ALL God's anger against our ALL sins on the cross.

As a dear friend once put it, when describing her conversion, "I now see that God doesn't excuse our sins, nor does He compromise His rules. He doesn't ignore our resistance, nor does He slacken His demands. But instead...He takes on our sins, and, inconceivably, sentences Himself to death... for us."

God punishes Himself for our sins, and by doing so, frees us from having to be punished for them ourselves. It was what she called her "discovery of the grace of God."

Then **SECONDLY**, we need to address the fact that what Job said about needing to accept both GOOD and EVIL from God was NOT wrong in any sense, for as the author immediately goes on to tell us, "In all this Job DID NOT SIN in what he said." His statement is NOT off-base at all! Unlike the statement by Job's wife, this is NOT "foil material!" It is NOT an assertion we are to REJECT, or consider theologically flawed in any way. But, rather, it is quite clearly something we are to accept, affirm and believe. It is right on the mark! It's true! The last half of verse 10 makes that very clear.

Though many in today's church do have a major problem even associating God with evil in any way, it IS a concept we must wrestle with, because the Bible itself DOES associate God with evil on numerous occasions. Which means we must now consider (if we are to rightly understand this text) the relationship between GOD and EVIL.

And as we do, it becomes clear that the God of the Bible, as Scripture declares, will always do what is right (Gen. 18:5). Likewise, Moses tells us in Duet. 34:2:

"God's works are perfect, and all His ways are just. [He is] a faithful God who DOES NO WRONG—upright and just is He."

From these and numerous other passages we can conclude that **God never DOES evil! EVER!** But **LISTEN**: *That's NOT to say that God doesn't allow evil, or ordain evil, or even create the potential for evil, or evil itself.*

As we read from Isaiah 45:6-7:

"I am the LORD, and there is no other. I form the light and I create darkness, I bring prosperity and I create disaster, I the LORD do all these things."

The word used there, and translated "create," is the Hebrew word "bara"—the same word used in the first few chapters of Genesis, where we are told that, "God created the heavens and the earth and everything in them."

And similar to our text in Job, the word that is translated "disaster" there is the Hebrew word "ra," which again, is almost always translated "evil." And remember, it is God Himself who is saying this about Himself—literally:

"I am Yahweh, and there is no other. I form light, and I create darkness, I bring prosperity, and I create evil, I Yahweh do all these things."

(Showing us that although God does not DO evil, He does, by His very own testimony, "CREATE" evil.)

We find the same exact thing stated in Amos 3:6, where the prophet asks two questions that clearly demand a “YES” answer:

“When a trumpet (the alert signal for approaching danger or an approaching hostile army) sounds in a city, do not the people tremble?”

And the answer? YES! Of course they do— **EVERYONE knows that!** And right in keeping with that question, he then asks another question which he likewise expects they will answered with an obvious “yes” response:

“When disaster (that is, “ra” or “evil”) comes to a city, has not the LORD caused it?”

And again, he EXPECTS that everyone will answer: YES! Of course it is, every-one knows (or should know) that! God, being Sovereign, ultimately determines everything that takes place in His universe. Being the Omniscient, Omnipotent, and Sovereign LORD of the Universe, NOTHING can happen in the world He rules apart from His Sovereign approval, whether it be good or evil.

“Not even a sparrow can fall to the ground,” says Jesus in Matthew 10:29, “apart from the WILL of your Father who is in heaven.” That is, not even the death of an insignificant little sparrow can take place anywhere on the face of this earth, unless God has “willed” it to be so!

And LISTEN: It’s NOT simply that it can’t happen without His KNOWING about it. That’s NOT what Jesus is talking about! He says it can’t happen apart from God WILL-ING it to happen! Whether BIG or small; good or EVIL; peace and prosperity or calamity and disaster—it just can’t happen unless God “wills” it.

It’s something God goes to great length to show us in the very next chapter of Amos, where He once again declares that it is He Himself who sends rain on one town, and withholds it from another; sends rain on one field, and not on another (4:7). And furthermore, in seeking to get His people to repent, He openly declares it is He Himself who sends famine, drought, mildew, blight, war and even death. Which means that even though God does not DO evil, it does NOT mean that HE doesn’t SEND evil. A point clearly demonstrated in Amos 4:6, 7, 9,10 and 11.

As Mark Talbot (Associate Professor of Philosophy at Wheaton College) stated at the conference I attended last Fall on “Suffering and the Sovereignty of God”:

“Open Theists [and others as well] are trying to let God off the hook for evil, but God doesn't want to be let off the hook for evil. God doesn't want us to let Him off the hook. God never does evil, but (as we saw last night) He ordains any evil that anyone does... Everything God purposes happens, and nothing except what God purposes happens.”

I believe he's right. In fact, as I pointed out last week: It is clear that God in some way “ordains” evil—even if it's simply by permitting it to happen—because He clearly possesses both fore-knowledge of it, and the power to stop it—should He so choose to do. And I KNOW many wrestle with that. Maybe some of you seated here today are struggling with it right now. I did—long and hard.

Yet, the thing that sealed it for me (as a Christian) was looking at the death of Jesus, and realizing it was God's eternal plan all along. It should have come as no surprise to me that God ordains evil, for that is CLEARLY what the Bible declares in relation to the sufferings and the death of Jesus.

Revelation 13:8 tells us:

Jesus was, “the Lamb slain from the foundation (or the creation) of the world.”

In other words, the suffering, torture and death of Jesus at the hands of wicked, conniving, evil men (THE MOST EVIL ACT THAT HAS EVER TAKEN PLACE ON THE FACE OF THE EARTH)—was ordained by God from the creation of the world.

Before there was even a sinful decision made by Eve; before the original act of disobedience even made the death of Jesus necessary, God had already ordained the most evil act ever carried out by human beings—the betrayal, beating, humiliation, and crucifixion of Jesus.

Peter told the Jews that very thing on the Day of Pentecost speaking of the crucifixion:

“This (Jesus) was handed over to you by the set purpose (or as some versions translate it, “the definite plan”) and foreknowledge of God, and you, with the help of wicked men, put Him to death by nailing him to the cross.”

Which means that what happened to Jesus was indeed the PLAN, and PURPOSE, and WILL OF GOD who ORDAINED FROM THE BEGINNING OF TIME THAT IT BE SO, even though He knew that it would be accomplished through “wicked men” carrying out an “Evil” deed.

Who, then, can deny that at least on one occasion, God ordained evil? Though it wasn't just once. Who can deny that what Job had to endure wasn't just "adversity," or unpleasantness, but EVIL? His possessions were stolen. His servants and children were killed. Now he suffers intensely. Yet God (for reasons known only to Himself) is the one who ORDAINED it.

Which brings us to the **THIRD** point I need to address (a point that confuses many people!): That just because God does ordain evil, does not therefore mean that the people, or beings, who actually carry out that evil are somehow less responsible for their evil deeds. Somehow in the incomprehensible and infinite structuring of reality as we know it, God ordains all that ever comes to pass, yet man is still fully responsible for everything he does. Illogical as it seems to our finite brains, that is what the Bible declares.

Those wicked men who put Jesus to death were no less responsible, and no less guilty for their actions, despite the fact that unbeknownst to them, they were carrying out a divine purpose and plan of redemption that God had ordained from the creation of the world—a plan He purposed to carry out before Adam was even created, or there was even an act of disobedience to make the death of Jesus necessary!

And how do we KNOW these WICKED men who carried out the EVIL DEED of crucifying Jesus were responsible for their actions, despite the fact that God had planned it from eternity past? Peter tells us so when he says that the Jews were NOT ONLY cut to the heart when he informed them that by the SET PURPOSE and FOREKNOWLEDGE of God, they had crucified was the Messiah! But he also tells us by telling them that what they must do for having done such a horrible EVIL thing is to REPENT!

Jesus shares the very same truth. Speaking in a way that is nearly inconceivable to most modern people, Jesus tells us (referring to the fact that Judas would soon betray Him) in Luke 22:22:

*"The Son of Man will go as it has been determined,
but woe to the one by whom He is betrayed."*

God ordained it, says Jesus! It was determined long ago as part of His eternal plan! But that made Judas no less guilty and no less subject to being punished for his evil act, than if it had never been ordained by God.

And I know that confuses people! Most people rarely, if ever, combine those two ideas, let alone in the same sentence!!! But Jesus does, because He wants us to know, that although GOD does indeed ordain all that comes to pass, PEOPLE are STILL fully responsible for ALL that they do! God does indeed ORDAIN every evil act, yet every person must still REPENT for every evil thing they do!

Like it or not, and confusing as is, that IS what the Bible clearly teaches. GOD is fully Sovereign, and MAN is fully responsible—and we as Christians must live in the tension created by affirming BOTH of those two seemingly contradictory truths at the same time.

Then **FOURTH**, though some have suggested that this “problem” of God “ordaining evil” can be easily resolved, merely by pointing out the fact that God ordains some things in a “passive” or “permissive” way—(where He Himself does not actually carry out the evil afflictions that buffet Job, but merely allows Satan to do so)—it really equals the same thing in the end.

Whether or not He ordains things actively or passively, He is still (as the Sovereign LORD of the Universe) the One who ULTIMATELY determines EVERYTHING that comes to pass (be it good or evil). The fact that He does it “passively” through Satan, simply goes to prove what I’ve been saying all along—that although God ORDAINS evil, He is never the One who actually DOES evil. Yet, pastorally speaking, it is both WISE and APPROPRIATE, when counseling people who have suffered great loss, to say that God ALLOWED it, rather than saying that God ORDAINED it—even though in the end, it really equals the same thing.

Then **FIFTH**, I now need to take this truth which Job tells us, and apply it to our own situations, and ask, “How should we deal with the fact that God ordains the evil things that affect our own lives, and the lives of people we love?” “After 3 weeks in Job we now know that merely blaming it on Satan, or chance, or some supposed weakness or inability in God is NOT an option. So how DO we deal with it?”

AND THE ANSWER? It all comes back to TRUST. I must TRUST that God as God KNOWS and DOES ONLY what is BEST, even if I can’t “for the life of me,” ever figure out how evil is both NECESSARY for the furtherance of His redemptive plan, or the BEST possible option, given the pain it causes me and those I love.

Hard as it is (and it is hard!) I must TRUST that if I knew all that GOD KNOWS, and if I saw everything AS GOD SEES IT, I too would say, “It is as it must be.”

You see, ultimately the source of our struggle is this:

We can't see the big picture. OUR vision is limited to our own subjective view of past events and an equally subjective (and often distorted) view of the present! We often interpret even the events we do see, wrongly, because our "view" tends to be governed simply by how it affects US, or our immediate family, or our close circle of friends, or our community or our nation alone. In other words, our view is extremely stunted and thus extremely lacking. But God, on the other hand, understands the WHOLE picture! He sees the past, present and FUTURE all at the same time! He knows all the interconnected threads of each persons' life and how each one will work itself out in the flow of history!

Unlike me, God has a COMPLETELY OBJECTIVE, ENTIRELY ACCURATE, FULLY COMPREHENSIVE and FLAWLESSLY FACTUAL understanding of EVERYTHING and how it all works together, and what needs to happen, before it ever happens, in order for everything to work out exactly as He has PLANNED and PURPOSED and DETERMINED from all eternity past!

That boggles my mind! I can't understand how He does all that! But I TRUST that He does—and that if I could understand everything as He does I would indeed say of whatever has or will happen, *"It was as it had to be, and given what I now know, I would have done or ordained the exact same thing."*

Which brings me to my **SIXTH** and **FINAL** point: The need to trust God even when the circumstances of our lives seem to imply that He MUST indeed HATE US. You see, Job's sufferings are so intense that it's hard for his wife and friends not to think that he's committed some horrible secret sin that's so bad, God has turned on him with a HATRED, RAGE and WRATH that few have ever experienced.

He's lost everything he ever held dear, and now he's being afflicted with painful, pussy, oozing sores all over his body—sores that smell with the stench of infected flesh, and quite frankly, wreak of evil. Yet Job still trusts, even in the midst of this EVIL affliction, that the Sovereign God who has ultimately ORDAINED it (even though Satan carried it out) still accepts and loves him. His faith is astounding!

But the story doesn't end there! Because what we're going to see in the very next chapter, is that the INTENSITY and LONGEVITY of Job's suffering and pain eventually short-circuits that faith, and a darkness (uncharacteristic of him) comes over him, and whatever faith we see expressed here seems to evaporate.

Which tells us WHAT, about intense prolonged pain? It short-circuits faith! Pain (when bad enough) consumes our attention. We become so focused on IT, that we lose the greater perspective. Our thinking becomes twisted. We start entertaining irrational and suicidal thoughts. We can even lose our grasp on reality, and start questioning things we never questioned before. The unrelenting onslaught of pain actually convinces us that maybe it's true—maybe God does indeed hate us.

And when you get to that point, all you can do is cling to the promises of the Gospel. When it FEELS like God hates you, and your CIRCUMSTANCES imply that He hates you (and people even suggest that He must hate you)—the only thing you can do, is cling to the promises of the Gospel—remembering, as the Puritans used to say, “that the mere desire to believe is faith.”
Trying to believe, when you can't believe, is an act of tenacious faith!

Refuse to let your feelings and circumstances dictate reality, because for the child of God, the Gospel dictates reality! You ARE loved (despite what you feel)! You ARE accepted and cherished (like Job) (despite what you're experiencing)! That's what this book tells us! Even when evil came Job's way, God had NOT FORSAKEN HIM! And as hard as it is to believe, the same is TRUE FOR YOU. Look beyond the pain!