

January 8, 2006

A Lengthy Trek Through The Landscape of Divine Sovereignty and Human Suffering  
Matthew 2:16-23 / Hebrews 11:32-40 / Job 1:1-22

Today, as my sermon title notes, we are embarking on, "A Lengthy Trek Through the Landscape of DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY and HUMAN SUFFERING" — something we will do by going through the Book of Job, from beginning to end, chapter by chapter, and verse by verse.

Job is a book I've wanted to preach on for quite some time now. And the reason I've wanted to, is because I don't believe there's a topic that can take us any deeper into the fathomless depths of true human concern than that of suffering.

All spiritual talk, and all church activity, and all theological rhetoric, and all Christian service and dialogue is ultimately nothing more than a trivial distraction, if it doesn't at some point relate to, or addresses the issues of pain, evil or human suffering. For only when you touch on those things do you plumb the real depths of what the soul constantly, earnestly, relentlessly wrestles with, and ultimately seeks an answer to.

More precisely, Job addresses the more specific, and harder to understand issue, of why the RIGHTEOUS in particular suffer. Most people do not struggle long, in their hearts and minds, with the suffering of evil people. They deserve it (we reason)! They are reaping what they've sown. For people who do evil to be repaid with evil seems innately right to most people. Thus in the case of the wicked, few struggle. Hitler (we would say) got his due, and very few (inside or outside of Germany) struggled to understand how God could let him die a tragic death in an underground bomb shelter. It's just plain easier for most people to swallow or justify the suffering of wicked people in their minds.

But when we come to JOB we come to a totally different situation! Because here in Job it's not a wicked man that suffers, but a RIGHTEOUS man. In fact, the most righteous of all men who lived on the earth at that time suffers—intensely! And He's not only "righteous" (which in OT terms means a man of faith and moral integrity who sought to obey God's law) but he is also said to fear God, shun evil and be "blameless."

And be careful not to misunderstand this term. It doesn't mean "perfect" by any stretch of the imagination! In fact, Psalm 19:12-13 essentially gives us a definition of the term "blameless" when it says:

*"Keep your servant also from WILLFUL sins; may they not rule over me.  
Then I will be blameless, innocent of GREAT TRANSGRESSION."*

So, what is a blameless person? It's a person who desires not to sin willfully; a person who is not "ruled"(or a "slave") to any particular sin; a person who is innocent of GREAT transgression. That is, when you examine their life you don't see any glaring sin. Nothing jumps out at you, so to speak. There's no obvious blatant defects of character.

Do you find sin? YES! Put any person's life under the magnifying glass and you will find sin—hidden and otherwise—Jesus being the only exception. Sin exists in everyone, it just isn't as obvious in the life of a "blameless" person.

And that was the case with Job: He was a sinner, yet he was righteous, and godly, a man of faith and moral integrity—moreso than anyone else in his day. Yet he suffers in a way few (dare I say any) of us, will ever suffer. And that is hard to swallow! That makes us ask "WHY?"

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In fact, last year I preached a sermon in my church in Honduras, where I alluded to the fact that God sometimes (in the mystery of providence) sovereignly ordains that even those He is MOST pleased with, should suffer—and sometimes severely—using Job as the most obvious example.

In fact, I said: Job suffered, NOT because he had sinned, but precisely because he was the most blameless and righteous man of his day.

Well, that evening I received a very emotionally heated email from one missionary in my congregation who could not believe I said such a thing. In fact, he went to great lengths to find the sin that brought all Job's suffering upon him. It's right there in the first chapter, verse 5, he said: "Job succumbed to the sin of fear."

*"He would rise early in the morning and sacrifice a burnt offering for each of his children, thinking, 'Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts.'"*

But far from his assertion having any merit, the Author of Job implies that that was actually one of the things that made him so righteous! In fact, in doing so he was prefiguring Christ, who also knew that God's children often sin and curse God in their hearts, and thus offered the sacrifice of himself on their behalf, and even to this very hour intercedes for them daily before the throne of grace!

Yet, you see what that missionary's problem was? He considered all suffering as a punishment from God for sin. And therefore he couldn't believe—or better yet, his theology wouldn't allow him to believe that a Sovereign God would ordain the suffering of an innocent person who hadn't specifically sinned—or done something sinful to make him deserving of such a punishment.

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But let me say this right from the very start:

Job's suffering has NOTHING WHATSOEVER to do with  
HAVING COMMITTED SOME SIN—be it minor or major!

If you believe it does, you will NEVER understand the Book of Job! In fact, that's what his wife and friends believed (if you can call them friends!), and thus they spend 36 chapters trying to get him to admit it!

“Job you've sinned! That's the only viable explanation as to why all this is happening to you! You were bad and so a bad thing is happening to you. Admit it, and repent of the sin you committed, and all your suffering will end.”

Not true! That's the whole point of the book! People can suffer without it having anything to do with some sin they themselves have committed.

So often, when we suffer, the very first thing we think is: “I did something wrong. God's punishing me for something.” But this book tells us that when bad things happen, it's not necessarily God striking out in some tit for tat manner against some sin we've committed—especially if we are believers. Granted I may suffer the consequences of some sin, but this book shows us it isn't necessarily so. And we should never assume it is so—especially in the lives of others—lest we heap unnecessary guilt, anxiety, and emotional trauma upon those who are already suffering enough!

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Like a pastor friend of mine in New Bedford, Massachusetts, who was dying of brain cancer, and had one parishioner who would continually tell him, "If you would just repent of the sin that brought it on, God would heal you." How cruel! Seriously. How very cruel. That person had obviously missed the whole message of the Book of Job—the Gospel according to Job.

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And that's not all. At an even deeper level, and in an even more universal sense, Job addresses a far more basic issue for many—namely, "How suffering, pain and evil, can exist in a universe ruled by an infinitely good and all-powerful God."

John Hick states the problem this way:

"In debates centering upon the question of the existence or non-existence, the reality or non-reality of God... the problem of evil continues to have a crucial place. It ... is at the heart of the God-question... (Yet) it is important to bear in mind... (that) the problem of evil does not attach itself as a threat to any and every concept of deity. It arises ONLY for a religion which insists that the object of it's worship is at once perfectly good and unlimitedly powerful. The challenge is thus inescapable for Christianity, which has always steadfastly adhered to the pure monotheism of it's Judaic source in attributing both omnipotence and infinite goodness to God."

Epicurus, the Greek philosopher who lived between 341 and 270 BC phrased the problem this way:

"God either wishes to take away all evils, and is unable, or He is able and unwilling... If He is willing and unable, He is feeble, which is not in accordance with the character of God. If He is able and unwilling He is against us, which is equally at variance with God. If He is neither willing nor able He is both feeble and against us, and therefore not God! If He is both willing and able, which alone is suitable to any right concept of God, from what source do evils come, and why does He not remove them?"

It's not an easy question to answer! Yet the Christian, unlike the Hindu, or the Buddhist, or the Muslim, must address it. The Hindu and Buddhist, because they do not believe in a personal, infinitely good, or all-powerful deity, feel no need to offer an explanation for evil and suffering. Their view of the divine as both impersonal (and or impotent) protects them from even having to address the issue.

And likewise, the Muslim, who does not believe that God is infinitely good nor loving, needs not offer an answer as well. To the Muslim, God IS all-powerful! Make no mistake about that. He is a fearsome deity! But He is also very arbitrary. He merely does what He does and ordains what He ordains... period. And thus for the Muslim, whatever is, was meant to be, and whatever happens, happens—suck it up and deal with it!

But, as Hick goes on to point out:

“Given the traditional Christian belief in God as the unique, infinite, uncreated, eternal, personal Spirit, absolute in goodness and power, the accompanying problem of evil, in its general form, is readily stated... ‘If God is perfectly good, He must want to abolish all evil. If He is unlimited in power, He must be able to abolish all evil. So if evil exists, either God is NOT perfectly good, or He is NOT unlimited in power.’”

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And if you know anything at all about the underlying roots of theological division in Christianity, then you'll know that SOME Christians have chosen (on the basis of this seeming problem alone) to say, that, if those are the choices—if they must choose between one option or the other—then they will choose to do away with God's OMNIPOTENCE. He CANNOT BE, they say, ALL-POWERFUL.

Few (if any true Christians) are willing to say that God is not perfectly GOOD. But a good many have indeed chosen the latter option, and openly declare (as does Rabbi Kushner in his best-selling book, “Why Bad Things Happen to Good People”) that when it comes to suffering and evil, God is WILLING (that is He would like to take it away), but He is UNABLE (that is, He lacks the power to do so).

When put up against the wall, and made to feel they must choose between a God of infinite goodness or a God of absolute omnipotence, they have chosen to divulge God of His omnipotence—something that even Epicurus (an unbelieving Greek philosopher) refused to do—saying, “It made God feeble, which was not in accordance with the character of God.” (Amazing, isn't it? That he had a more accurate concept of God than many modern day believers in the church!)

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And here let me say, I don't claim to have all the answers to the “problem of evil.” I don't. In fact, as Oswald Chambers rightly pointed out way back in 1917, when preaching on the Book of Job to soldiers of the Great War stationed in Egypt:

“In the Book of Job no attempt is made to explain the why of suffering. The problem in connection with suffering arises from the fact that there is seemingly no explanation of it.”

Yet I do believe the Book of Job was written to answer SOME of the why questions! Not all of them, mind you! Even this Book of Job (which is the most extensive treatment of the problem of evil in the Bible) will not supply us with a flawless, air-tight, “to everyone’s satisfaction,” resolution to the question of how God’s absolute omnipotence and His infinite goodness can co-exist in perfect harmony, without the one negating (or diminishing) the other, to any depth or degree.

It will merely affirm certain truths about God, instruct us concerning the role of Satan, help us to avoid many of the wrong conclusions about suffering and its relationship to sin which Job’s friends fell prey to, and then merely ask us to trust God in faith on the issues about which He has chosen to remain silent.

If there was ever a book which confirms the truth that Moses declared in Deuteronomy 29:29, Job is that book!

“The secret things,” said Moses, “belong to the Lord our God.” That is, they are for Him and Him alone to know, and He has neither good reason, nor moral obligation to reveal them to us! In fact, He can’t, because to understand all the infinite mysteries of God we would have to be God!!! Which means there are some things we will NEVER know, not even in eternity—and God’s purpose in allowing the righteous to suffer is one of them. For those things we must merely trust Him. “But,” as Moses goes on to tell us, “the revealed things belong to us and our children, forever.”

Meaning that we must believe and affirm the things God HAS REVEALED, while we continue to TRUST Him (even into eternity) for the secret things He HAS CHOSEN NOT TO REVEAL—one of them being the reason why righteous people often suffer so intensely. It is a question whose answer we will surely never be given an answer to—because we wouldn’t understand it even if we were!

Now I’ve given you some of the essentials you need to know in order to even be on the right page as we begin Job. But there’s more! Even before we begin our verse by verse study of this book, I need to lay out a few more things—namely, a few of the rules of biblical interpretation when it comes to wisdom literature—lest you think I’m preaching heresy, or accuse me of not believing the Bible!

**FIRST**, since Job falls into what we call “Wisdom Literature,” it is interpreted a little differently than, say, purely historical literature like Deuteronomy, or prophetic literature like Isaiah, or an Epistle like Romans, or the Book of Revelation which is apocalyptic literature. Each genre of biblical literature must be interpreted differently, lest one misinterpret it, or worse yet misapply it to their own life, or the life situation of another.

For instance, PROVERBS (which also fall into the category of Wisdom Literature) are just that—proverbs! That is, they are statements that are generally true, but not always true. Yet, many Christians fail to read proverbs as proverbs, and because they have, they have often mistakenly turned them into promises!

They’re NOT! And we can run into immense problems when we try to interpret a PROVERB as a PROMISE—which it was never intended to be!!!

Like the proverb I hear Christian parents misuse all the time, which says:

“Train a child up in the way he should go and  
when he grows old he will not depart from it.”

I don’t know how many Christian parents I’ve spoken with over the years who claim-ed that, or interpreted that verse as “a promise from God to them,” only to feel that God broke His promise or that they did something horribly wrong when one of their children strayed from the faith (or when other Christian parents accused the parent of having done something horribly wrong when one of their children strayed).

After all, they say, “God promises....that if you  
raise them right, they will not depart from it.”

But of course God doesn’t PROMISE anything of the sort!!! That’s a misuse and often a cruel misapplication of that verse. Because it’s not a promise, it’s a proverb! All it really means is that “generally speaking” children will continue in the way they’ve been raised. That’s it! But like all proverbs, there are many exceptions to the rule, as I tried to point out in my sermon on Matthew 1:1-17 just prior to Christmas!

And the same thing is true of the Book of Job. Much of what we find in Wisdom Literature must be evaluated carefully, because it falls into a category scholars call “Foil Material.” That is, material the Bible DOES NOT want us to believe, and contains admonitions the Bible WOULD NEVER want us to obey or follow!

This is true of much of the advice of Job's friends. It's similar to the oft repeated injunction, "Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die." That's obviously NOT something God wants us to do! Like nearly 80-90% of the Book of Ecclesiastes, it's "foil material"! It's stuff your NOT supposed to believe or obey!

But the problem comes in when it's NOT SO OBVIOUS! Like some of the advice given by Job's friends. Some of it is true. It's theologically sound. It's just not true to Job's particular situation! And some of it is NOT TRUE AT ALL (either to Job's situation or anyone else's)! And again, some of it is half true, but not fully true. And as J.I. Packer rightly points out:

"When a half truth is presented as the whole truth, becomes an untruth."

And you know what the hard part is? The Bible doesn't put a "little red flag" beside all the foil material and say, "This one's true, but wrongly applied. This one's false and to be rejected outright. And this one's a half-truth—accept the first half of the verse and reject the last half!" Which means we will need to use great discernment as we go through the Book of Job! And you will also need to be understanding, when you hear your pastor say from the pulpit (of a verse of Scripture (!)), "This is wrong! Don't believe this, and definitely don't follow it's example or do what it says!"

So, when I make such statements, please don't throw tomatoes, or have clandestine meetings on how to go about tarring and feathering your pastor! I'm not a heretic, or a flaming liberal! I'll just be trying to point out the verses you're NOT supposed to affirm, or apply—at least not in the way Job's friends do! That's what I'm supposed to do when it comes to wisdom literature!

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Which brings me to the **SECOND** rule of interpretation and application — "Everything in it's context." Which means that on occasion I'll have to cover large sections of Job at a time, while on other occasions I'll have to limit myself to a verse or two. And which also means that sometimes the main point of the passage is merely implied, and that the stated truths are not the main point!

You see, I need to tell you right up front that I believe in the literal interpretation of Scripture, and my goal is always to be "biblical." But I define "literal" a little bit differently than many today. To them literal means literal! To me (in keeping with Luther, and Calvin and the other Reformers), literal means what the author intended to convey.

Thus, there is often a difference between what the author actually SAYS, and the message he hopes to CONVEY by what he says. A good example comes to us in the words of Jesus, who says in Matthew 10:34, "Do you think I came to bring peace? No, I tell you, but a sword." That IS what Jesus literally says, "I came to bring a sword."

And thus when I taught an Adult Sunday School class in Honduras on the Christian View of War, one man (who had served in covert operations in the military) challenged me. He said Jesus came to endorse war and killing, and he used this verse from Matthew as a "proof text." "*A sword is something you kill with,*" he said. To which I responded that the Author of Hebrews tells us that it is an instrument used to divide — soul and spirit, joints and marrow.

I said to him, "What Jesus means is, I came to bring "division"— which is the way Luke actually phrases the same exact verse when he uses it in his Gospel! That is, what Jesus is speaking about in the context is separating believers from unbelievers; the sheep from the goats so to speak; believing family members from non-believing family members. That is what he means, even though that's not what he says.

And the man jumped up in anger, pointed his finger at me and said, "Does it say "sword" in the Greek?" "Yes," I said, "that is what He says. But that's NOT what it means. It means division." To which he responded in an angry voice, "If it says sword it means sword!" (and to him "sword" meant justification to kill). Sorry, but I disagreed then, and I still do!

He was schooled in the literal interpretation of Scripture, as was I. But my definition of the word literal was "What the authors of scripture meant to CONVEY by what they said." His definition of literal was that "every word always meant exactly what it SAID"—which may or may not be true! And in Job, it is definitely not true on occasion. Which again means we need to use immense wisdom when we come to the Bible. For our goal is not always to affirm exactly what it says, but to affirm what the author means by what he says—the two sometimes being slightly, or wholly different.

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You see, I'm excited about going through Job! And I hope you are as well! I just wanted to prepare you, so your enjoyment may not be spoiled by temporary misunderstandings! Few have a higher regard for the Bible than I do—(rightly understood)—I just needed to say that as we begin our trek through Job!