

## ***Desperation and the Unknown***

### *The book of Job*

The past six weeks we've been discussing how we can respond in healthy, God-honoring ways when we find ourselves desperate for God to work in our lives/circumstances. If we're lukewarm and indifferent about the will of God, we'll just "get by." But if we're desperate we can respond by engaging our wills and exercising faith: we pray fervent, persistent prayers (with fasting at times); we weep and mourn and lament as an expression of trust; we humble ourselves before God; we repent when we've sinned; and we take bold action when that's appropriate.

Today as we wrap up this series I want us to wrestle with a reality that informs everything we've said about being desperate. I want us to wrestle with the reality that things happen in this world that are beyond our scrutiny and beyond our ability to comprehend. If we are people of faith, this reality isn't a liability to our faith; it is an asset because it drives us to trust the God who sees and understands everything.

The book of the Bible that makes this point most clearly is the book of Job. Job illustrates that ***Desperate people trust God even when they don't understand why they are suffering.*** There will be times when you have no idea why you're suffering, why God hasn't yet done what you've asked Him to do, or why others seem to have a much easier and more comfortable life than you. The book of Job tells us that in the midst of such unknowns you can and should trust God as good and generous and compassionate. Today we consider the book of Job.

One way to summarize the plot of the book of Job is to say that ***Job's desperate circumstances were the result of factors he did not and could not know.***

In the first couple of chapters of Job the readers are given information that the people in the book of Job don't have. We are first told that Job was a godly and blameless man. In 1:1 we read:

1 There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job; and that man was blameless, upright, fearing God and turning away from evil.

Much of the book of Job involves a discussion of whether or not Job is really blameless and upright or whether there was some hidden sin that brought about his suffering. And so it's significant that we're told up front that Job really was a godly man. As well, he was incredibly prosperous: he had seven sons and three daughters, and thousands of sheep and camels, and hundreds of oxen and donkeys. He also had "very many servants." In short, "that man was the greatest of all the men of the east" (verse 3). He was so conscientious spiritually that he offered sacrifices for his children just in case they had "sinned and cursed God in their hearts" (verse 5).

Job's faith is strong; he is wealthy; and his family is flourishing. Then came a fateful conversation between God and Satan. In verse 8 we read:

8 The Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered My servant Job? For there is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil."

Basically God asks Satan whether he had focused his attention on Job. God wanted Satan to know that Job was a shining example of someone who feared Him and turned away from evil.

9 Then Satan answered the Lord, "Does Job fear God for nothing? 10 "Have You not made a hedge about 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.

The accusation was that God had bought Job's loyalty by giving him such a prosperous life. "Of course Job fears You. But that's only because you pamper him so much. You've put a hedge around him and his family and You've given him great wealth." Here's the challenge Satan made to God:

11 "But put forth Your hand now and touch all that he has; he will surely curse You to Your face."

Satan was casting doubt on the sincerity of Job's faith. His challenge to God was, "Remove his prosperity and he will curse You to Your face." Maybe you've looked with envy at others' lives and thoughts, "They're just joyful because their circumstances are so good. If they experienced the suffering and disappointments I've experienced, they wouldn't be so happy. . ." Notice God's response in verse 12:

12 Then the Lord said to Satan, "Behold, all that he has is in your power, only do not put forth your hand on him." So Satan departed from the presence of the Lord.

Shockingly, God agreed to remove the hedge from around Job with only one restriction; Satan couldn't touch Job himself. Job's wise, loving heavenly Father granted Satan permission to devastate Job's life. That's exactly what Satan did as verses 13 through 19 explain. On the same day three messengers came to Job and informed him that he had not only lost his wealth (his cattle and his servants had been stolen or killed); his ten children were also killed when the house in which they were feasting collapsed in a great windstorm. It's hard to imagine a more desperate set of circumstances than Job's.

The thing that is so shocking is that God sat by and watched this all happen. We have plenty of examples in the Scriptures of people losing their prosperity and their lives because of disobedience. But Job was upright and blameless. Job - like Jesus - suffered as an innocent man. In some ways, Jesus' suffering is more palatable to us because it accomplished something: His suffering secured our salvation and our justification and our eternal life. But what did Job's suffering attempt to accomplish?

Basically **one thing**: It would enhance God's reputation in heaven. His suffering would prove to Satan that Job's devotion to God was genuine. Job wasn't loyal to God

because of the perks; he was loyal to God because He is Lord. If Job still worshiped God after losing everything, God's reputation in the heavenly realm would swell and grow. Note: If you believe that God exists for our comfort and our glory, this makes no sense. But if you believe that the entire created order (including humanity) exists for God's glory, what happened to Job is somehow "in bounds."

Remember that Job had no idea about the wager made in heaven. All he knew is that he had lost everything. The question on the table is whether Job will curse God to His face as Satan claimed he would. Look at verse 20:

20 Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head, and he fell to the ground and worshiped.

In his desperation Job expressed his grief and anguish freely. Job's response is also described as worship. He declared God's worth with these words:

21 He said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb,  
And naked I shall return there.  
The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away.  
Blessed be the name of the Lord."  
22 Through all this Job did not sin nor did he blame God.

God was right and Satan was wrong. Job not only didn't curse God to His face; he worshiped God. He understood that everything he had was given to him by God. He had entered the world penniless and possessionless, and he would leave the same way. Job actually believed that what the Lord had given him, the Lord had a right to take away.

Job gives us another way to response in the midst of our desperation: worship. Job demonstrates that since God is always worthy, worship is always appropriate. Job also demonstrates that we can respond to our desperation in healthy, God-honoring ways ***even when we don't have a clue why we are experiencing tragedy and heartache.*** Job didn't know that his circumstances were the product of a wager that had been made in heaven. But he did know that God cared about his response.

We'll come back to this point in a few minutes, but notice again verse 22: "Through all this Job did not sin nor did he blame God." This statement suggests that Job could have sinned and could have blamed God (in the sense of accusing Him of being uncaring or inattentive or unjust).

In chapter 2 Satan and God debrief about Job's response. Satan says that the only reason Job didn't curse God to His face is because he/Satan couldn't touch Job's body. God grants permission as long as Satan doesn't kill Job. This is what we read in verses 7 through 10:

7 Then Satan went out from the presence of the Lord and smote Job with sore boils from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. 8 And he took a potsherd to

scrape himself while he was sitting among the ashes. 9 Then his wife said to him, "Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die!" 10 But he said to her, "You speak as one of the foolish women speaks. Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

Even though Job had no idea why he was suffering, he refused to curse God to His face. He believed that God was good in spite of his circumstances. There will be times when you and are in the exact same place as Job at the end of chapter 2: we have suffered some type of devastating loss and we have no idea why.

This is not to say that we **never** know why we're experiencing some trial or difficulty. Sometimes we are "reaping what we've sown": we've committed some sin and there has been fallout in our relationships. Or sometimes we sense that God is refining us or causing us to trust Him in ways we wouldn't otherwise. In 2 Corinthians 12, for example, Paul explains that he had been given his "thorn in the flesh" so that he would not exalt himself. Sometimes we can have a pretty clear sense why we're experiencing some circumstances.

But many times we're just like Job: we could guess for a month **why** God allowed some tragedy, but it would only be that - a guess. Nevertheless, God is worthy of our worship. God can be trusted even when we don't know **why** we're suffering.

Much of the rest of the book of Job is **a warning against saying too much and insulting God** in the midst of "the unknown." First, let's consider:

### ***The warning from the counsel of Job's "friends."***

When we encounter someone who is suffering severely, there are two extremes to avoid. One extreme is to ignore the person who is suffering. Sometimes when we don't know what to do or to say, we don't do or say anything; we ignore the suffering. I'm ashamed to say it, but I've ignored others' suffering for this reason because I didn't know what I could do or say. When we do that, those suffering can feel neglected and unloved.

The other extreme is to charge in with answers, trying to fix others' problems and address every doubt. Sometimes people with vast amounts of spiritual knowledge are most vulnerable to this pitfall. This was the case with Job's friends.

Job's four friends (Eliphaz, Zophar, Bildad, and Elihu) put on a clinic in what NOT to do when you have a friend who is desperate, who has suffered some horrible loss. Their initial response was perfect. Look at 2:12-13.

12 When they lifted up their eyes at a distance and did not recognize him, they raised their voices and wept. And each of them tore his robe and they threw dust over their heads toward the sky. 13 Then they sat down on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights with no one speaking a word to him, for they saw that his pain was very great.

The dropped everything and mourned with their friend for seven days. They didn't give any advice. They mainly fulfilled the command to "weep with those who weep."

But after they heard Job lament, they began trying to convince Job that his suffering was the result of some sin. They had a very tight theology that demanded a cause and effect relationship between a person's sin and suffering. Job 4:7-8 is representative of what they told Job. This is what Eliphaz told Job:

7 "Remember now, who ever perished being innocent?  
Or where were the upright destroyed?  
8 "According to what I have seen, those who plow iniquity  
And those who sow trouble harvest it.

This was his way of telling Job, "You are experiencing so much trouble because of your iniquity/sin. When you 'sow' iniquity, you 'reap' trouble." Even though he overstates and misapplies the point, Eliphaz' theology is basically right: people do reap what they sow. Pharaoh of Egypt wouldn't allow God's people to go free, so the land experienced a series of devastating plagues. In the New Testament, Ananias and Saphira reaped what they had sown when they lied to the Apostles; God struck them dead. You can probably think of example in your life where you've reaped negative consequences of your own actions. (See Galatians 6:7-8.)

The problem was that Eliphaz was wrong to apply this principle to Job. Sometimes good theology is bad medicine. That was the case here because Eliphaz was ignorant of what had happened in the unseen spiritual world. In chapter 42 God rebukes Job's friends and tells them 1) to go offer animal sacrifices and 2) have Job pray for you. Their forgiveness would come in response to the prayers of the man they had so mistreated.

The warning from the counsel of Job's friends is this: when you come alongside someone who is suffering and desperate, don't say more than you know. Don't assume that you are omniscient, knowing every factor that has caused the other person's suffering. I'm not saying that you never speak truth to a hurting person. But I am saying that we need the humility before God that Job's friends didn't have. And we need to speak only those words that address "the need of the moment." As we read in Ecclesiastes 3, there is a time to speak and a time to remain silent.

Years ago a friend of mine (not someone at Faith) experienced incredible loss - the death of a child. I called him up and said, "I'm coming over." I sat with him for 20 or 30 minutes listening to him think out loud and process his grief. When I was leaving he paid me a high complement: "Steve, you did a good job today. You just sat there and listened. You didn't give me any advice." As somebody who talks for a living, I need to remember that sometimes the gift I bring a desperate person is my presence, not my words.

### ***The warning from the response of Job:***

In Job 38 (after 35 chapters of painful dialogue between Job and his friends), God finally speaks. This is the perfect opportunity for God to set the record straight; this is the perfect moment to explain why the righteous suffer. But He doesn't. God's response to Job has been called "a majestic non-answer." And yet - and this is crucial. God's response satisfies Job. God's majestic non-answer should satisfy us in the midst of our desperation.

In Job 38:2 God responds to Job:

2 "Who is this that darkens counsel  
By words without knowledge?"

Job was not guilty of the sins mentioned by his friends. But he was guilty of speaking "words without knowledge." Job said things to God and about God that he shouldn't have. We aren't told exactly the ways Job had said too much. My view is that Job insulted God by questioning His justice. In 19:6, for example, Job said, "Know then that God has wronged me." In 19:7 he said, "Behold, I cry, 'Violence!' but I get no answer; I shout for help, but there is no justice."

This is a bit different than the psalms of lament that Russ spoke about several weeks ago. The laments of the psalmists were complaints; but they were ultimately an expression of faith. They cried out to God in light of His track record and in light of His covenant with them. But we get the sense that Job crossed a line by accusing God of being unjust.

In chapters 38-41 God pummels Job with questions that expose how little Job understands about the physical universe. For example, in Job 38:4 God asks Job, 4 "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding. . ." He asks Job, "When was the last time you send rain to water the earth? or sent a bolt of lightening?" (38:34-35). Philip Yancey summarizes God's point in these chapters in this way: "Until you know a little more about running the physical universe, Job, don't tell me how to run the moral universe" (Disappointment with God, p. 190).

In Job 42:1-6 we read Job's confession:

1 Then Job answered the Lord and said,  
2 "I know that You can do all things,  
And that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted.  
3 'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?'  
"Therefore I have declared that which I did not understand,  
Things too wonderful for me, which I did not know."

Job admitted that he has said more than he knew about God and His ways.

6 Therefore I retract,  
And I repent in dust and ashes.”

The warning from the response of Job is against insulting God by saying things that are not true of Him. Remember that the entire plot of Job revolves around God’s reputation in heaven. The heavenly host was listening to Job’s words and was watching Job’s responses. Initially he didn’t sin in response to his loss (Job 2:10), but eventually he said too much and had to “repent in dust and ashes.”

Sometimes I hear people make comments like, “You can say **anything** to God. He can handle it.” I don’t think that the Bible supports that view. The book of Job tells us that when we are desperate and mourning over some loss, that’s the time to pay careful attention to what we think about God and say about God. He is a personal God who cares about his reputation in this world and in the heavenlies.

We can cry out to God in our anguish and pain and ask Him all the questions that come into our minds. But we shouldn’t cross a line and say things about Him that aren’t true. Specifically, we shouldn’t accuse Him of being asleep or of being unconcerned or of being unjust. We are not in a position to judge the creator.

To the contrary, when there are things we **don’t** know about our circumstances, we should cling to the things we **do** know. We know that God is compassionate because He sent His one and only Son to die for our sins. A God who sacrifices His Son on our behalf can never be accused of sitting comfortably in heaven while we’re suffering down here on earth.

This is a perspective we need to cultivate in the good times so that it will be second-nature in the tough times. We need to “weave the parachute before we jump out of the plane” (as it’s been said). We say with Job, “The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be His name.”