

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

By Burt L. Burleson, D.Min.

“On Top of the World”

*The first in a four-part series entitled,
Community that Enables a Journey*

Job 1 and 2

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For the past month, we’ve been thinking together about spiritual formation and our part... the work we do. We’re going to continue to look at that but through a very different lens. It’s a dramatic shift from James to Job... from the practical to the paradoxical.

We’re going to look again at this disturbing story and the journey Job makes, and we’re going to ask the question, **“What kind of a community would we need to be to enable that sort of journey?”**

So... with that big question in mind, here we go into what was a charmed life... Job was hitting on all cylinders.

Family life... seven sons and three daughters... seven and three... how nice that the number of his sons and daughters are Biblical numbers of completeness. And they all get along... they get together on holidays, alternating from home to home. None of that dysfunctional, sibling rivalry here in Job’s clan.

His business is booming. He’s got more livestock than you can shake a stick at. Three thousand camels even... what could he possibly do with three thousand camels?

Popularity... everybody in the East knows and respects him. Job has a wall full of plaques thanking him for his service to and leadership with this or that group.

Job is religious. He does his duty at church and keeps that base covered well. In addition to sacrificing for his own sins, he makes an extra sacrifice just in case anyone in his family has done anything wrong.

Job’s life was amazing. It was “Father Knows Best,” “Bonanza,” “The Cosbys,” and “Little House on the Prairie” all rolled into one. Job was on top of the world... Everything was perfect.

But not for long.

One of the disadvantages of being so good and so successful is that you are very visible. Not only did everyone in the East notice Job but so did everyone in heaven and Job... uncomfortable as it makes us feel... becomes the pawn in a celestial chess game.

God and Satan make a little wager at Job’s expense... **“Job only loves you because of what’s in it for him and he’ll hate you if it’s taken away.”**

“Bet he won’t.”

“Bet he will.”

“You’re on...”

And for sure, this part of the story can really keep you up at nights.

“Why would God need to prove anything to the Evil One?”

“Why would God use Job and Job’s suffering so flippantly?”

“Can an evil one really do damage to our lives?”

Lot’s of questions and the storyteller does have your attention, huh! Which is half the point. This story has your hackles up and has you leaning forward. It’s not predictable or fair. We’d sleep through a less offensive, subversive, odd story.

Not here, where God seems a little... “un-Yahweh-like.” And evil seems a little out of control... or is it *too* in control.

I should say here at the outset... **“Be careful of what you make of this story.”** There’s a reason it’s paired with the first verses in Hebrews in the Lectionary. As Christians, we see everything through Jesus...

... One another...

... The world...

... Our purpose as human beings...

... The Bible... the story of Job...

... God...

If you read this book and have a view of God that would include him demolishing someone's life to win a bet with Satan then... you aren't a Christian. A Christian sees things through Jesus... who, as Hebrews tells us... **is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being.**

Be careful how you read this story... Not every form of biblical literature is there to be engaged in the same way. Be careful with this... especially what you make of evil and Satan.

Satan says he'd been out **"roaming the earth"** and maybe that's enough to say. Evil lurks... looking for a place to plop down, looking for those places where there is an absence of goodness.

And where there is an absence of beauty... the seeds of ugliness are planted.

And where there is no justice or mercy... meanness takes root.

And where people aren't living in grace and where they aren't connected to God's love... sin is the symptom.

Evil rains down when there is a goodness draught.

Job is an important exception. Common wisdom of the day was that if a person was good this was the ultimate insurance policy. Bad things did not happen to good people. It's even in the Bible... It's in the very first Psalm, which comes right on the heels of this strange book.

"Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked... whatever he does, prospers... The Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish."

Job is good but he is perishing. He is a walking oxymoron... a suffering, good man, right here, front and center in the Bible. This book is literally at the center of the Old Testament and it's saying, **"Good people do suffer."**

Blame it on the weather...

Blame it on fate...

Blame it on evil...

Blame it on God, if you like...

Whatever, your understanding of it... what's clear is that it "ain't" Job's fault. He should have read the fine print of the righteous insurance policy he'd taken out... It says there at the bottom in the small type that all the above terms can be disregarded... "just because" and your life can come crashing down around you... sons, daughters, camels and all.

For our purposes this morning, I'm interested in Job's knee jerk response to losing it all. His instincts.

In round one of the tragedy, he loses everything but his wife and his health. Four messengers come on the heels of one another, did you notice? Each one arrives as the other is still speaking. Job can't even get a word in edgewise.

"Your cows and donkeys were stolen."

"Your crops and servants were burned up."

"Your camels, all 3000, have been rustled off..."

"And all your children died in a tornado."

"At this..." the writer says. What's he going to do? Faint? Die of a heart attack? Scream? Go into shock?

No! **"At this, Job got up and tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell to the ground in worship."**

It's like he's been prepared for just such a moment. Like some well-oiled machine. Like a finely trained soldier in the Lord's army, only giving his name, rank, serial number, and devotion to God.

Job goes through the motions that are prescribed for tragedy. It's Tragedy 101.

Get up...

Tear your robe.

Shave your head.

Fall down and worship.

Then he quotes scriptural poetry. When you see this story on the page, you see that the narrative stops, it's not in paragraph form anymore. It's set off in stanza.

Job begins quoting the wisdom of the tradition... the sayings of his day. Things he'd heard his grandmother say. Things he'd heard a million times down at the temple.

**"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 round two of his tragedy Job loses his health and he's covered with sores. Sitting there in the ashes. Picking at his scabs. It just feels better sometimes when it hurts... huh?

And we get some insight into why his wife wasn't taken. She's the only thing he didn't lose and hearing her nagging maybe we can see why? It's worse having her around. She's really after him. **“Curse God and die.”** What a nice spousal thing to say.

There Job is, up to his eyeballs in sores and ashes... he looks to his wife for a little comfort. She's not going to offer so much as a hug. **“You're in denial man. Curse God and die.”** Nice lady!

Again, Job's response comes from some place of borrowed strength, a wisdom he'd learned. He expresses his theology... his doctrine. **“Shall we accept good from God and not trouble? Shouldn't I have expected this?”**

And though we may recoil at the site of Job sitting there stoically in his pain, quoting scripture and axioms, at one level what he's saying... is true, isn't it? He is naked, both coming and going.

The truth is Job's losses have only been accelerated. He was going to lose it all eventually. That's the nature of this journey we're on. We eventually and ultimately turn lose of it all.

Possessions... relationships... status... health... not a one of us are going to take one bit of it with us. Not even the shirts on our backs.

Job has learned this well... and though he's in the dark as to why he's lost it all... he affirms that it was all a gift in the first place. **“The Lord gave it.” “I didn't earn it, create it, or finagle it in any way. The Lord gave it... and I guess He wanted it back.”**

Hard as it is to hear and impossible as it might be to say in the ashes especially, Job is onto something true. **“Shall we accept good and not trouble?” “Isn't suffering a part of the deal?”**

It is according to the New Testament... remember. The cross reveals all sorts of truth to us, and one of the most important is that suffering is a part of things. There's no redemption without it and no life without death. This is just true... and Job trusts in it... at one level.

The story of Job begins with a description of Job on top of the world... Job is in control of everything. And a few verses later what's clear is that being on top is always an illusion. Job wasn't on the peak of anything and Job did not lose control. Job never had it to begin with and Job, who is wise, knew this.

He'd learned it somehow.

And that's really what I want us to see from these first two chapters of Job. This is where Job's pilgrimage of pain and faith begins.

Someone taught Job a few things. Simple... clear... concise... concrete truth. Everything Job says can fit on a bumper sticker. Maybe he had one on one of his oxen wagons, The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Right there next to the one that says, Don't Mess with the Land of Uz or the one that says, Camels R Us.

We all have to begin with something this simple and this clear. With something that is unquestioned that gives our world meaning and order. We cannot live in a world that feels chaotic and too full of ambivalence. The soul and psyche can't take it.

Job was given the gift of a worldview that said that everything fit and that God was in charge and was to be trusted. It wasn't complicated and shouldn't be.

It should fit on a bumper sticker and it should stick like a bumper sticker... sure and unquestioned. The community should give it unapologetically.

In the Old Testament you see this demonstrated. **“Stack up these stones and when your children ask what they mean you tell them, ‘We were slaves in Egypt and God Almighty delivered us and gave us this land and made us a people’.”**

The instructions aren't, **“Stack up these stones and when your children ask what they mean say, ‘I don't know, son, what do you think they mean?’”**

It's not, **“When your children ask say, ‘Well, they could mean several things. It depends upon your perspective, really’.”**

“We're not sure now but at one time they reminded superstitious people of God.”

No... Our stones mean this and this in particular. **“God delivered us here.”**

This is where the journey of faith always begins. Remember, our question, now... **“What kind of community enables a healthy journey of faith?”** That’s what we want to know so that’s what we can be.

And our first task... our first calling... is to create a container. We have to offer one another a place to be that is secure. That’s what we need first. Especially in the first half of our lives, we need a foundation.

We need the known and those who know it.

We need answers and assurance.

We need something around us that will hold.

Because one of these days, one way or the other, we’re going to lose all our camels. Life will get crazy and we’ll need coherence.

That’s why during a funeral we don’t get into philosophical discussions about the problem of pain... we just say, **“The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want.”** That’s what we have to know and remember in that moment. It’s clear and simple and will fit on your soul’s bumper.

Did you see the response of the Amish to their tragedy? **“We forgive, that’s just what we do.”**

That’s a container.

Paula D’Arcy tells the story of being at the hospital with a friend... in the Emergency Room... standing over the body of the friend’s college-aged son... and hears her say, **“He was never really ours, was he?”**

That’s a container.

Now, if this sermon is bothering you... make sure that you’re here next week... Because, you’re going to say Amen to that one. And if you’re saying Amen to this one... make sure you’re here next week, because I’m going to... Job is going to... make you very uncomfortable.

For today... for this beginning moment... Remember that to create a healthy journey for one another... we’re going to always be nailing some things down.

What are they?

Jesus loves me this I know for...

O how I love Jesus because...

For God so loved the world...

While we were yet sinners...

And... it also includes... **We believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth:**

And in Jesus Christ His only Son, our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into Hell; the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God, the Father Almighty; from where He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic church, the communion of the saints, the forgiveness of sin, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

And while in the community, we aren’t afraid of questions and conversations and doubts... when we say that, we must not stutter. It is the container... the place we must start if we’re to start at all.

It’s where Job started. It saved him and made all the difference... at least for a little while, at least in the beginning of his journey. And it will for you too.

Thank you, God, for that which holds us and for that which we can hold on to. Thank you for the concrete and the simple. For the clear and concise. Thank you for stones stacked up all around us that remind us of truth and of faithfulness.

We offer our gratitude today for the foundations that were laid for us. We give thanks for structures and for scriptures and for commands and for boundaries. We thank you for parents and churches and saints who spoke truth clearly and who made us memorize it deep down.

May our truths bless us in the moments when all else seems to be failing, and may they propel us on into your mystery with faith and trust.

We offer our prayer through Christ, the rock of our salvation.

Amen.