

“This Man Was Blameless”

Texts: Job 1:1-5; Galatians 6:7-10

The Book of Job is one of the most moving and profound stories known to humanity. Here is the account of a righteous and godly man, nearly overwhelmed by the loss of everything he owned and by the death of most everyone he loved, and who now sick and afflicted beyond words, comes face to face with the sovereign God who brought all of these things to pass. And all the while, Job struggles to believe God’s promise to rescue him from his plight when every circumstance and every word offered in explanation only serves to call into question either Job’s righteousness or God’s goodness. It is not only a moving and fascinating story but almost all of us can relate to what we will read in this book. Many of us have been called to suffer and we certainly empathize with Job’s plight. It is likely that we all know people like Job’s wife and friends who mean well, but who only make things worse every time they open their mouths.

But what makes the Book of Job so important for our consideration is the fact that in the life of Job we come face to face with a number of fundamental and inescapable biblical truths: (1) God’s absolute sovereignty over all of our lives (including our health and our personal circumstances). (2) The fact of human sin and finitude in contrast to the depths of God’s wisdom and holiness, and (3) The well-intended, but terribly flawed words of counsel from Job’s wife and friends, which only add insult to injury. This wonderful, moving, and utterly profound book is indeed what Francis Andersen describes as “one of the supreme offerings of the human mind to the living God and one of the best gifts of God to men.”¹

As we begin to study this most profound of biblical books, we will begin by describing the nature and character of this book and meet its central character—this blameless and righteous man, named Job, who feared God and shunned evil. It should come as no surprise that critical scholars often see Job as a work of fiction because the origins of this book are unknown and remain shrouded in mystery. But it is clear from Ezekiel’s prophecy (14:14, 20), that Israel’s prophets did not believe this story to be mythological since Job was mentioned by Ezekiel alongside of Noah and Daniel as men known for their righteous conduct in the face of unbelievers. In James 5:11, the apostle speaks of Job as a prophet, whose perseverance in the face of great suffering was based upon his hope that God was full of compassion and mercy and would bring to pass all of the things he has promised, even when things appear to be beyond hope. Job’s faithfulness is held out as something God’s people are to emulate in times of trial and persecution. Therefore, Job must be considered an historical individual, whose intense suffering and personal experience is substantially recorded for us in the pages of this book.²

Undoubtedly, the story of Job was passed down across the generations either as oral tradition or as a written document before coming to an unknown author, a man who lived between the time of Solomon and Israel’s exile in Babylon. This places the time of the writing of the Book of Job in that period when

¹ Francis L. Andersen, *Job: Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1974), p. 15.

² Meredith G. Kline, “Job,” in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, edited Charles F. Pfeiffer and Everett F. Harrison (Chicago: Moody Press, 1976), p. 459.

Israel's wisdom literature (i.e., the Psalms and Proverbs) was being composed. Although the Book of Job contains a mixture of almost every type of literature found in the Old Testament, it is most often grouped under the heading of "wisdom literature", which is why the Book of Job is placed in our Bibles before the Psalms, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.³ Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, this unknown author produced from these earlier sources what is now our canonical Book of Job.

We also know this to be the case from the literary structure of the book itself. The prologue (chapters 1-2), God's speeches (chapters 38-42:6) and the epilogue (42:7-17) all use the covenantal name of God (YHWH), while neither Job nor his friends use this name in the various speeches we find throughout the middle chapters which are a series of discourses between Job and his friends. The introduction and conclusion were added or edited later since they contain information Job would have never had—i.e., the heavenly scene in chapters 1 and 2. This particular literary structure is described as a "sandwich style" in which the central core of the story (a series of poetic speeches running from chapters 3-46:2) is surrounded by a prologue and an epilogue.⁴

This means that the man Job probably lived well before the time of Moses, most likely during the time of Abraham and the patriarchs. There are no references made in the Book of Job to any of those events which are part and parcel of Israel's history, such as the call of Abraham or Israel's bondage and deliverance from Egypt. Nor does Job make any reference to things like the temple or the monarchy. As one writer points out, it is rather astonishing how detached from Israel's history this book is.⁵ Yet, Job's friends—like Job himself—are not pagans, but God-fearers, all of which points us to the time of Abraham and the patriarchs, somewhere between 2000-1500 BC.

There are a number of factors which reinforce placing Job's life during this time-frame. The first is a theological reason. As Calvin points out, "In fact, from the time of Abraham, Melchizadek had the Church of God, and sacrifices which were without any pollution. And so, although the greater part of the world was wrapped in many errors . . . God had reserved some little seed for himself who were retained under the pure truth, indeed waiting for God to establish His Church."⁶ In other words, God has always had true believers upon the earth who are difficult to account for because they come to faith in extraordinary ways—one of them being Job. Thus, as we work our way throughout this book, we must remember that Job's trial and suffering occur toward the beginning of redemptive history when very little special revelation had been given. And yet, Job clearly knew that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was the true and living God.

³ Andersen, Job, p. 33.

⁴ For helpful discussions of the background to Job see the works of Andersen (pp. 15-76) and Kline (pp. 459-461) cited above, along with those of John E. Hartley, The Book of Job: The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1988), pp. 3-63; and R. K. Harrison, Introduction to the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1979), pp. 1022-1046.

⁵ Andersen, Job, p. 62.

⁶ John Calvin, Sermons from Job (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), p. 9.

Yet another reason why we can reasonably put Job in the time of the patriarchs can be found in the details of the book itself. Like the patriarchs, Job lived more than one hundred years (42:16). His great personal wealth stems from the size of his herds (1:3) and he acted as the priest of his family (1:5). The mention of both the Sabeans (1:15) and Chaldeans (1:17) also points us to the fact that Job lived at some point during the time of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. His story was passed down to successive generations until Job was composed by an unknown author in its present form, probably during the time of Solomon about 970 BC.⁷

What makes the story of Job so compelling is the fact that it deals with something with which every Christian must wrestle—God’s sovereign control over every area of our lives. We have no problem believing that God determines how tall we will be, whether we are male or female, who our parents are and what nationality we will be. We do not doubt that God determines what gifts and skills we will have, as well as whether or not we are born to means or poverty. We accept the fact that God determines the circumstances of our lives—including our health, length of life and whatever calamities may befall us. We accept these things without question. We all nod in agreement to the assertion that “God is sovereign.” At least we nod in agreement until God does something we may not like nor understand.

As Christians, we also believe in original sin. All people who enter this world are guilty for Adam’s sin as well as their own. Therefore, whenever someone suffers, the easy answer as to why they suffer is to go to our theological default setting. Why do people suffer? We suffer because we are sinners. We are being punished for what we did.

But this is not what happens to Job. Job, we are told, is a righteous man, blameless before God and his fellow men and yet he suffers the loss of everything. All of his possessions. All of his children. He even loses his health, becoming a miserable wretch covered with sores.

And yet we also read that Job was blameless and upright, that he feared God and shunned evil. In fact, it is Job’s wife and friends who point out to Job that his suffering must have come about because he is a sinner and therefore deserves to suffer because he must have done something to cause God to punish him. The story of Job is the story of the suffering of the righteous, not of the wicked, and this is why this book strikes such a chord with us. Why do we suffer when we have done nothing to deserve it?

This is a very important thing to keep in mind as we work our way through this book. It is common for people to suggest that the Book of Job is really an answer to theodicy—supposedly, in this book we find an answer to the nagging question as to how a good God can allow evil and the suffering of his creatures. To this very important question we often hear the following answers. Some attempt to solve this problem by denying that God is all-powerful. Arminians contend that God voluntarily limits his sovereignty so as to allow humans to exercise their freedom. Even worse, open theists believe that God is within time, and is therefore truly limited as to what he can actually do about evil. God can direct evil, he can respond to it so as to minimize its consequences and he can reward those who suffer. But ultimately, God is unable to control evil, because he is truly limited. “Oh, yes, God will win in the end”, they say, but in the meantime, this is how it is. God suffers with us. He learns with us as we suffer. He strives against evil in and through us. And maybe, just maybe, if we strive with him, things will come out all right in the end. But this approach obviously fails, because the “god” of open theists is not the God of the Bible. He is nothing but a figment of sinful human imagination.

⁷ See the “Introduction” to Job in the NIV Study Bible, pp. 731-33.

Another answer to the question of why a good God allows evil is to say that God is sovereign over all things, including evil, but that God is not necessarily good. In many ways, this is the impersonal “god” of Islam, or even what is commonly called “fate.” Of course, the question which lurks behind this approach to the problem of evil is that God has a dark side, that he manifests himself as either a God of love or a God of vengeance, as he wills, and we never know which it will be. Surely, this is why our contemporaries get very nervous when we as Reformed Christians talk about God’s sovereignty and speak of things like election and predestination.

People fear God’s sovereignty because deep down inside they fear that a sovereign God cannot be completely good. People like Dave Hunt tell us that the absolutely sovereign God of the Calvinists cruelly sends millions to hell. He causes people to suffer.⁸ Unless such people establish a prominent role for human freedom, they have no explanation as to why people suffer. Thus, they recoil in horror because they think that Calvinism’s sovereign “god” is actually cruel (and perhaps demonic). But this answer fails because it cannot address the biblical data which clearly teaches that God foreordains whatsoever comes to pass, but is in no sense the author of evil.⁹

The third possible answer to the question as to why a good God allows suffering is that people are basically sinful. So, if they suddenly suffer, it must be because they have done something wrong which brought about God’s judgment upon them. The ancients believed that God was sovereign and that people were sinful, but linked these two things together in such a way that the degree to which someone suffered was also the degree to which they had sinned. This is the view held by Job’s wife and his friends. This is a view held by many people today—including many of our own friends and family. This not only solves the problem raised by theodicy—“how can a good God allow evil?”—but provides the theological categories through which Job’s friends attempt to aid him in the midst of his suffering. Why is Job suffering? He must have done something wrong. Since God punishes sinners and since Job is suffering, (the logic runs) so too, Job must have provoked God to anger through some particular sin. Job must be getting what his deeds deserved.

But the Book of Job was not written to answer such a theodicy. This is not a book of apologetics, designed to give an answer to the problem of evil. This is a book for God’s people, many of whom he will call to suffer. Don’t miss the obvious. Job was a righteous and upright man. According to the prologue of this book, Job did not commit some horrible sin which provoked God’s punishment. In light of Paul’s instructions in the Book of Galatians (6:7-10), Job did not sow to the flesh. On the contrary, Job sowed to the Spirit. Therefore, Job was known for doing good, especially to his own family. Job was such a righteous man that God even brought Job to the attention of Satan.

Thus the question raised and answered in the Book of Job (perhaps not to our satisfaction) is not that of the typical theodicy—“how could a good God allow evil?”—but rather that question which every believer has asked at one time or another, “why do the righteous suffer?” Why is it that someone like Job, who believes God’s promise and whose righteous conduct was clearly a fruit of his faith in YHWH, why does such a person suffer? And by extension, we ask “why do any of us suffer, especially, if we, like Job, are

⁸ See, for example, Hunt’s self-serving caricature of the Reformed faith in: Dave Hunt and James White, Debating Calvinism (Sisters Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, 2004).

⁹ See my essay, “Human and God’s Purpose: Some Thoughts on the Doctrine of Divine Concurrence,” in *Modern Reformation* (September/October 2002).

blameless and upright, in that we love God and shun evil?” It is the suffering of the righteous—not the problem of evil in general—which is addressed by the story of Job.

The great irony of this story is that the reader knows why all of this is coming to pass, while Job has no idea as to why God allows all of these horrible things to happen. The reader knows what Job does not—that God has summoned Satan, pointed Job out to him, and then said to the Accuser, “have you considered my righteous servant Job?” “There is no one on the earth like him.” Satan sees this challenge as a great opportunity. Not only can he demonstrate that people love God only insofar as God blesses them, but neither can Satan resist the opportunity to afflict the man who is the apple of God’s eye. Take away Job’s possessions, his loved ones, and his health, and God’s plan to entice people to love him will be exposed for what it is—divine bribery.

And so, Satan reasons, Job is not really righteous. His righteousness is ultimately self-serving. He obeys God because God blesses him if he does so. Satan dares to ask God, “Let me take away the blessings and see if Job still loves you.” Job’s supposed “righteousness” will be shown to be nothing but self-interest and, therefore, “sin.” God’s demands for righteousness and the dispensing of covenant blessings and curses will be exposed as divine bribery.¹⁰

But once Satan has taken up the challenge, God must permit his arch-enemy to remove all those things which God is supposedly using to bribe Job so as to behave righteously. And Job must pass the test. This righteous man must endure this unspeakable ordeal without knowing how the story will end. Only the reader knows why Job’s ordeal comes about. Job must rely upon his faith in YHWH’s goodness, even in the face of overwhelming evidence and what appears to be wise theological counsel to the contrary. Job must believe to the bitter end that God will do what is right and that Job somehow and in some way will be vindicated in the end. Job knows that God does not retributively punish those who obey his commandments. Job knows that God does not punish blameless and upright people. And Job knows that he is righteous and upright before the Lord. Yet, the reality is that blameless and upright people suffer. So Job (and the reader) must struggle to understand why.

It is with this historical background and theological purpose of Job in mind, we now turn to the first few verses of this book so as to meet that man in whom this amazing story centers.

In verse 1, we read the following. “*In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil.*” The land of Uz lies in that region to the east of the River Jordan (*Qedem*—“the east”) in what is now the nation of Jordan, anywhere between Edom on the south, Moab on the east, and the land of the Aram to the north. While Job was not an Israelite—since no tribal or family identification is given—he clearly worships Israel’s God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.¹¹ So, apparently, do his friends and family.

But as the story opens and we meet the central character, what stands out is the assertion that Job was “*blameless and upright*” and that “*he feared God and shunned evil.*” What does this mean? One thing it does not mean is that Job was sinless or that he had attained a state of victory over all sin. We know this to be the case because elsewhere in this book Job clearly declares himself to be a sinner. In Job 7:20, Job

¹⁰ “Introduction” to Job in the NIV Study Bible, pp. 731-33.

¹¹ Andersen, Job, p. 77.

laments, *“If I have sinned, what have I done to you, O watcher of men?”* Then in Job 13:26, Job laments *“For you write down bitter things against me and make me inherit the sins of my youth.”* Finally, in Job 16:16 -17, Job states that *“Surely then you will count my steps but not keep track of my sin. My offenses will be sealed up in a bag; you will cover over my sin.”*

If Job acknowledges himself to be a sinner, what does it mean when Job is described as being “blameless and upright?” The answer is simple. It means exactly what it says—Job was blameless and upright. He feared God and shunned evil. Job was an honest and moral man, who avoided evil. In chapters 29-31, Job can appeal to the public knowledge of his piety, which is the visible manifestation of his faith. Thus, when we read that Job was blameless and upright, we understand this to mean that Job believed YHWH’s promise to forgive his sins and, like Abraham, Job was justified through faith. Job believes and confesses that YHWH will cover his sins and through that act of faith, Christ’s righteousness was reckoned to Job, just as it was to Abraham.

But Job’s faith in YHWH bore much fruit of the Spirit, fruit which was tangible to all who knew him and fruit which was especially pleasing to YHWH. As one writer puts it, “there was an honest harmony between Job’s profession and his life, quite the opposite of the hypocrisy of which he was presently accused by Satan and later by his friends.”¹² Let me put it this way. Having been justified by faith, Job lived in such a way that his conduct before men was blameless and upright, in contrast to someone who is indifferent to the things of God, or who hypocritically professes one thing, but lives like that profession makes no difference.

Job’s conduct was exemplary (some of it is described in the following verses in the way he served as priest of his family). In Job 4:3-6, one of Job’s friends can declare of Job, *“Think how you have instructed many, how you have strengthened feeble hands. Your words have supported those who stumbled; you have strengthened faltering knees. But now trouble comes to you, and you are discouraged; it strikes you, and you are dismayed. Should not your piety be your confidence and your blameless ways your hope?”* In Job 42:8, when God rebukes one of Job’s friends by saying, *“My servant Job will pray for you, and I will accept his prayer and not deal with you according to your folly. You have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.”* In this we see that Job is a righteous man. Not only by virtue of his justification through faith, but by virtue of his daily conduct. Therefore when Job suffers, it is not because he has some secret sin, or because God is punishing Job because he has done something which provokes God to anger.

This is precisely why Satan sets out to expose Job’s obedience as phony and explains why the Lord allows Job to be put to the test. Even if God turned Satan to an ash at that very moment, the question about human righteousness resulting from divine bribery would never be answered. Job was truly blameless and upright. Job had done nothing to bring about the trial that is about to befall him. He feared God and shunned evil. Hence God allows Satan to put Job to the test to vindicate God’s righteous dealing with his creatures.

This also explains why Job has every right to cry out for God to vindicate his good name. After all, God has promised not to punish the blameless. But why then does Job suffer if he has done nothing wrong? That is the question which this book will seek to answer. And that answer is found in the wisdom and purpose of God.

¹² Kline, “Job,” p. 461.

In verses 2 and 3, we learn something of Job's personal circumstances before his ordeal begins. *"He had seven sons and three daughters, and he owned seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred donkeys, and had a large number of servants. He was the greatest man among all the people of the East."* As a servant of YHWH, Job took the creation mandate seriously—he had a large family (some have thought that the numbers of his children, seven sons and three daughters, are numbers indicating completeness and God's blessing) and his wealth, indicated by the large number of animals and servants, is obviously the manifestation of God's favor.¹³

Job's piety can be clearly seen in what follows. We read in verses 4-5 that Job's *"sons used to take turns holding feasts in their homes, and they would invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. When a period of feasting had run its course, Job would send and have them purified. Early in the morning he would sacrifice a burnt offering for each of them, thinking, 'Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts.' This was Job's regular custom."* Not only does Job function as a priest to his family, Job knew that there was no forgiveness of sin apart from the shedding of blood. Burnt offerings not only point ahead to a coming messianic redeemer, but were also a means of consecration. Job ensured that his own and his families' sins were covered, but he continually dedicated everything that he had unto the Lord.¹⁴ Here we can see in part what it means when we read that Job was blameless and upright. Job was the priest of his home and he acknowledged that everything he had came to him from the hand of a gracious God. Everyone who witnessed this knew that Job was the greatest man in the east. And this is that man whom God will point out to Satan, thereby plunging him into this great ordeal.

What, then, are to learn from these opening verses of Job?

There are three things we need to note about Job. First, Job occupies a unique role in redemptive history, unlike that of any other. Second, Job is in many ways a type of Christ. And third, Job is an example for us to follow in the midst of our own suffering.

As to the first point, Job occupies a very unique role in redemptive history. Although we know little about the man himself (other than he was very pious), we know that Job lived early on in the story of redemption, when very little information about the coming redeemer had been revealed. But Job believed in the God of Abraham, made burnt offerings for the forgiveness of his sins and those of his family and to consecrate his family unto the Lord. YHWH himself took delight in Job's upright living and blameless behavior. It is God who brings Job to the attention of Satan, thereby setting in motion the ordeal Job was about to undergo. This means that in many ways Job's ordeal is unique. This is important for us to keep in mind, because when we suffer, unlike Job, we do not suffer at the hands of the Devil. Job lived well before the coming of Christ and Christ's defeat of Satan at the cross (cf. Colossians 2:15), which resulted in what John describes in Revelation 12:7 as a war in heaven, when the Devil was cast down from heaven to earth. Satan no longer has access to the throne of God. He cannot accuse us or attempt to barter with God about our personal circumstances.

Furthermore, Job is unique in that not only does he demonstrate a remarkable piety—the Lord himself says there is no one else like Job—but Job's ordeal and its outcome proves that all of God's dealings with his creatures are just and righteous, even if we do not understand why God does what he does. While the

¹³ Cf. Kline, "Job," p. 461 and Andersen, *Job*, p. 79.

¹⁴ Kline, "Job," p. 461.

secret things belong to the Lord, in this story we struggle to answer the question once asked by Abraham, “will not the judge of the whole earth do what is right?” In the story of Job we see that the answer is “yes.” God always does what is right, even if his purposes remain hidden from us until we enter his presence. We may not know the answer now, but we will then.

Second, while Job’s great piety is unique, Job is still a sinner, who must offer sacrifices for his sin. While he is faultless and blameless and sows to the Spirit, not to the flesh, Job was born in sin and as a child of Adam must taste the sting of death. In the words of one writer, “Job is as faultless as any man can be. He is not everyman. He is unique. God boasts that ‘there is none like him on the earth’ (1:8; 2:3). As such he presents the case of an innocent sufferer in what is almost its acutest form. In one life only is Job excelled, both in innocence and in grief: in Jesus, who sinned not at all, but who endured the greatest agony of any man. In His perfection of obedience and of suffering the question of Job and of all us have their final answer.”¹⁵

While Job passed his test, he did so only for himself and to prove God’s wisdom in the face of Satan’s challenge. But Jesus Christ endured a far greater test than Job, and he did so on behalf of all of God’s people. Jesus Christ alone was without sin and fulfilled all righteousness, something even Job’s great piety could not accomplish for himself, let alone others.

Third, as a justified sinner, Job, like Abraham, is a member of the covenant of grace, because through the means of faith, Job received the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Job believes God’s promise. He offers sacrifices for sin, on behalf of himself and his family. But Job also offers these sacrifices to consecrate himself, his family and all of his possessions to his creator and redeemer. This, too, is part of membership in the covenant.¹⁶ Thus in many ways Job is just like us. He is what we commonly call “a good Christian” or a “faithful” or pious man. Job is above reproach which, by the way, is one of the requirements for men to serve in Christ’s church as a minister, elder or deacon. He did as Paul instructs all of us to do in Galatians 6:8-9: “*The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.*” This was true for Job. It should be true for us as well. Job’s piety is an example of that kind of piety that should be manifest in our lives.

But we also learn from Job how we should respond to suffering, should this be God’s purpose for us. When Job is called to suffer, he does not curse God, nor seek to take his own life. Because he is blameless, Job has every right to cry out for vindication—as do we if we have sown to the Spirit. Job is not suffering because he has done something wrong. Rather Job is suffering because God has a purpose for his ordeal—as yet unknown to Job.

Unlike Job, we know how the story ends. And even when Job suffers beyond human comprehension, he still declares, “*I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth (19:25).*” How much more should we do the same. For we see what Job does not—that the redeemer’s agony on the cross is but the prelude to the victory won in the empty tomb and the exaltation of our Lord’s Ascension. For the one who suffered for our sins, dying in unspeakable agony which transcends Job’s, has now been

¹⁵ Andersen, Job, p. 79.

¹⁶ Kline, “Job,” p. 461.

given that name that is above every other name and is now King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Job knew that God in his wisdom would do what is right and even in the midst of his suffering tried not to look back—“what have I done to deserve this?” For the answer was not to be found in the past—“woulda,” “coulda,” “shoulda.” “If only I had . . .” Instead, Job looks ahead to that time when the wisdom and purposes of God will finally be revealed. And in this, Job is a fitting and wonderful example for us. For in the midst of our suffering, Job points us to Jesus Christ, who is the man of sorrows, fully acquainted with grief, and yet at the same time is that blessed Redeemer who stood upon the earth. For even in the midst of his grief, loss and agony, Job knew one fundamental fact which enabled him to endure—*“I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth”*

We have seen that one of whom Job speaks, and he is Jesus Christ our Lord, that one in whom human sin and the mysteries of human suffering find their answer. Amen.