

I want to address a topic that affects every one of us at some point in our lives and quite often at several points in our lives. That topic is suffering, specifically a path through suffering. So to do this I am going to refer to the life of Job.

This topic and the book of Job are important to all of us. As I said, suffering at some point in time reaches all of us and the more we acknowledge that fact and prepare for it the better we will be able to move through suffering when it comes. For those of you in the midst of intense pain and suffering, it is my hope and prayer that you will find strength, hope, and consolation in the scriptures we will consider.

So, let's begin with chapter one of Job.

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. 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. His sons used to hold feasts in their homes on their birthdays, and they would invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. When a period of feasting had run its course, Job would make arrangements for them to be 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. One day the angels came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came with them. The LORD said to Satan, "Where have you come from?" Satan answered the LORD, "From roaming throughout the earth, going back and forth on it."

Then the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil." "Does Job fear God for nothing?" Satan replied. "Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. But now stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face." The LORD said to Satan, "Very well, then, everything he has is in your power, but on the man himself do not lay a finger." Then Satan went out from the presence of the LORD. One day when Job's sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother's house, a messenger came to Job and said, "The oxen were plowing and the donkeys were grazing nearby, and the Sabeans attacked and made off with them. They put the servants to the sword, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!" While he was still speaking, another messenger came and said, "The fire of God fell from the heavens and burned up the sheep and the servants, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!" While he was still speaking, another messenger came and said, "The Chaldeans formed three raiding parties and swept down on your camels and made off with them. They put the servants to the sword, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!" While he was still speaking, yet another messenger came and said, "Your sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother's house, when suddenly a mighty wind swept in from the desert and struck the four corners of the house. It collapsed on them and they are dead, and I am the only one

who has escaped to tell you!” At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said: “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 all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing. ^{Job 1}

A path through suffering:

Begins with an irreversible commitment to God.

I believe it is highly significant that in the first chapter and first verse we are told the truth about Job. He was blameless and upright, feared God, and shunned evil. That is who Job was. Nothing religious or hypocritical about him—he loved God and understood that God himself was the meaning of life. His love for God affected everything he did, especially how he related to his family. If he thought his children may have sinned he offered sacrifices for them. It was his regular custom. This is who Job was. He wasn’t trying to impress anyone with his spirituality; he simply loved God.

Now if that weren’t enough, look at verse eight. The truth about Job is repeated for us. God is essentially bragging about Job: “he is blameless and upright, fears God, and shuns evil”. So what the scripture is emphasizing to us is that Job was genuine and loved and feared God from his heart. He was a righteous man.

Now look with me at verse 11. Satan comes to God and says it’s your blessings to Job that make him serve you. If you take away his blessings, he will curse you to your face. You see, Satan thought Job was like himself. He thought Job’s obedience was simply to obtain God’s blessing and protection. It was impossible for Satan to see and understand this one fact, **Job loved God for God.**

This is the very heart of the matter and pricks our conscience to ask ourselves, do I obey God because of who he is and my love for him, or because of what I think I will obtain from him? It is important to deal with this issue because when suffering comes— and it will—at that point, when God is all you have, will he be enough? Will you have a foundation in him that will see you through?

And so in one day Job loses everything, his livestock, all his possessions, and his children. Though this may seem impossible, it is not. Consider natural disasters: in recent weeks we learned of a mudslide in Washington State that in a day completely destroyed entire homes and in some cases lives were lost. This happened in one day. Consider tsunamis, tornadoes, and the like that can destroy and have destroyed entire homes and families in a matter of minutes. So Job’s story is plausible, reliable, and real.

So, Job lost all his possessions and children in a single day. His initial response to this tragedy flowed from his irreversible commitment to God. He worshiped! How could Job worship in the midst of his intense pain? Because before he lost his family and possessions, **he had already**

surrendered them to the God he loved. He knew what it meant to be surrendered to God. God calls us to this same place of surrender.

Jesus defined discipleship to himself in terms of surrender, for example, in Matthew 10:37-39: *“anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, anyone who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.”*

Jesus’ call to follow him is an all-or-nothing proposition. Only if you have surrendered all to him will he be enough in your suffering.

Now in chapter two the same scene happens once again. Satan is in the presence of God and God brags about Job. Satan still believes Job is a fraud and says, strike his flesh and bones and he will curse you to your face. So God says take him, but you must spare his life. And so Job is struck down with painful sores all over his body. In this terrible suffering even his wife forsakes him. She believes he is guilty of some horrible secret sin and tells him to curse God and die. But notice Job’s response: Shall we accept good from God and not trouble? Job is saying one simple thing: I love God and trust him; if he allows good I will worship him and if he allows trouble I will worship him. It is God that I long for, not an easy life.

A path through suffering:

Is marked with a conviction of God’s character. (9:27-31)

In chapters one and two God himself tells us of Job’s character. We are told without question that Job is blameless and upright. And when we see Job’s response to his sufferings, it seems almost impossible anyone could respond that way. But as we get a deeper look at Job in the following chapters, we see a man like you and me asking deep questions about his suffering and why God has allowed it.

As you continue to read through these chapters there seems to be an anchor that allows Job to make it through. That anchor is this: **Job is convinced of God’s perfect character; that is to say, God’s goodness.** I think often our knee-jerk reaction to suffering is to be tempted to question God’s character. We say, “If God is good then why . . . ?” But Job seems to be able to move past that and knows who God is.

“If I say, ‘I will forget my complaint, I will change my expression, and smile,’ I still dread all my sufferings, for I know you will not hold me innocent. Since I am already found guilty, why should I struggle in vain? Even if I washed myself with soap and my hands with cleansing powder, you would plunge me into a slime pit so that even my clothes would detest me. He is not a mere mortal like that I might answer him, that we might confront each other in court. If only there were someone to mediate between us, someone to bring us together, someone to remove God’s rod from me, so that his terror would frighten me no more. Then I would speak up without fear of him, but as it now stands with me, I cannot.” Job 9: 27-35

Job seems to be saying, I just can't pretend everything is OK and put on a smile. I'm suffering under your hand, God, and I'm afraid of what will happen next. Yet, I know you are not a man like me: this is not all in vain. If only I could hear your voice. If only I could speak with you, you would hear my case. Then I could find out what you would say. Job longs for the presence of God. He doesn't question God's character: rather, he has full confidence in it. He is brutally honest about all the questions of his suffering: he's not in denial. He simply longs to hear and understand God's ways in his sufferings.

This can be extremely helpful to us in our suffering. If we are convinced of God's character, that he is good and trustworthy, then we can move beyond questions of "if God is good" and move beyond destructive self-pity. Rather, we desire to hear his voice and see his work in our suffering. This is a path through suffering, a deep conviction of God's goodness.

A path through suffering:

Understands suffering is common to man.

I believe one of the worst traps Satan sets for us in our suffering is for us to ask the question, "Why me?" I believe this to be true because it turns our focus on ourselves, and presupposes nothing bad has ever happened to anyone else or worse, that someone else deserves suffering and not us. It allows us to think we alone are victims in this world, when of course just the opposite is true. Suffering is common to everyone.

In chapter 5 of Job and verse 7 we read, "**yet a man is born to trouble as sparks fly upward**". Eliphaz is right. Trouble, trials, and suffering are all common to the human race. We all experience suffering in this life. To be sure, it is at different times, in different ways, and in different degrees, but we all suffer.

As you read this, you may be right in the midst of great suffering. Listen, you are not alone!! Many others are suffering right now as well and many have suffered before you. You will make it to the other side. Listen to what the Bible says.

The righteous person may have many troubles, but the LORD delivers him from them all. Psalms 34:19

There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.

1 Cor. 10:13

Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you. 1 Peter 4:12

We all face suffering at some point in our lives; you are not alone. Keeping that perspective is critical in your suffering; it results in strength and resolve.

A path through suffering:

Includes a surrender to the sovereignty of God.

I have a piece of clip art I would like to show you. Don't you love that? I do! This piece of clip art was shown to me at a time I needed it most.

In March of 1988 I celebrated my 28th birthday. In April my wife and I celebrated our fourth wedding anniversary. In May we celebrated the first birthday of our then-only son and I was in the process of joining the pastoral staff at my church. Life was good . . . very good! Then in June all hell broke loose. My wife at the age of 29 was diagnosed with stage two breast cancer. The pastor of my church, whom I loved and considered a mentor, was found to be in sin. By August my wife had had surgery was in the midst of chemotherapy treatments and losing her hair I was unemployed and without a church family. Everything had fallen apart around us. It was during this season I was given this piece of clip art. I loved it!! It was very, very encouraging.

In our trials, testings, and sufferings we look for victory and rightly so. We have many biblical reasons to fight and believe for victory. We have been given authority in Christ and spiritual weapons and we need to know how to use them. There is no doubt to this. Romans 8 tells us that we are more than conquerors in Christ. And yet there are times we must ask the question, What is victory?

What happens when victory or deliverance doesn't seem to come? What happens when we've rebuked every evil spirit, cast out every will contrary to Jesus, and taken authority over every scheme of the devil, and still things don't improve? That has been my experience in certain seasons of my life. Usually what happens at that point, at least for me, is I think I must be sinning somehow. I begin confessing any known sin and usually some sins I didn't commit just to be safe. But what, after all that, if things aren't any better? I think we have to look at our definition of victory.

Is victory always seeing our circumstances change? Does it mean our failing business will always turn around, that we get the job we so desperately wanted, or that our ill loved one receives an instantaneous healing? I've come to believe that victory is those kinds of turnarounds, but also more than that. Let's look at Romans 8: 35-37: *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered. No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.*

Paul's point in this text is found in verse 37. In all these things we are conquerors. He doesn't tell us in Christ we will escape these things, but rather in the experience of these things, Christ's love will enable us to overcome them. We must leave room for the sovereignty of God. Not everything will work out the way we want or the way we pray it will. But that does not mean we are not victorious.

Never give up!!!! Fight with all you have!! And let the outcome with God.

A path through suffering:

Leads us to know that this life is not all there is.

Finally turn with me to chapter 19 of Job. I will begin reading at verse 13. *“He has alienated my family from me; my acquaintances are completely estranged from me. My relatives have gone away; my closest friends have forgotten me. My guests and my female servants count me a foreigner; they look on me as on a stranger. I summon my servant, but he does not answer, though I beg him with my own mouth. My breath is offensive to my wife; I am loathsome to my own family. Even the little boys scorn me; when I appear they ridicule me. All my intimate friends detest me; those I love have turned against me. I am nothing but skin and bones; Have pity on me, my friends, have pity, for the hand of God has struck me. Why do you pursue me as God does? Will you never get enough of my flesh? Oh, that my words were recorded, that they were written on a scroll, that they were inscribed with an iron toll on lead, or engraved in rock forever! I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within in.”*

Here is a man that is suffering terribly, horribly, in the worst of ways. In the midst of great physical pain his remaining family, friends, and those in his community forsake him. They are afraid to associate with him. Some even ridicule him. And the friends that have come to comfort him tell him he has sinned and needs to repent to be relieved of his sufferings. And yet Job knows that he has not sinned.

He is in one of the most difficult places any human being can be in—great physical and emotional pain all at the same time.

Yet . . . yet, because Job’s foundation had been laid exceptionally well, he knows where to look. Let’s continue at verse 23. Look at what Job says, *“I know my Redeemer lives”*. *I know that in the end I will see God. I will see God. Though my flesh is no more, though my body dies because of this disease, I will see God with my eyes!! I and not another.”*

Job knows that there is more than just this life. There is a time when all things temporal pass; that is where his comfort comes from. I will see my Redeemer, the one who loves me, the one who rescues me from all this suffering. Job knows where to look.

A final encouragement from Hebrews 12: *“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such*

opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

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