

*Job: Meeting God In Dust And Ashes*

This is the first Sunday in the season of Lent. If you're new to this Lenten season or Advent or these kinds of things that fall within the church calendar, that's okay. These are just ways in which the church, over time, has developed rhythms that help us enter into the story of Jesus.

The church calendar replays the story of Jesus over and over. So when we enter into Lent, what we're actually mirroring is the 40-day period in which Jesus went out into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan, and then he returned to his public ministry. Lent is, in some ways, us trying to mirror that same similar type of movement. We spend 40 days in various forms of fasting or abstaining from different things that are blocking or hindering us from the way of Jesus. It's simply a way in which we prepare to celebrate Easter. Easter is the high point of the church calendar. Lent is the chance in which we come and look inward at our own brokenness and frailty. We look at the need we have for a Savior.

On Ash Wednesday, we talked about this metaphor of ashes, that the ashes remind us we are sinners. Putting them on the forehead in the shape of a cross reminds us we have a Savior. It's this beautiful metaphor. Lent allows us that opportunity, not some rote ritual—certainly, it could be turned into that—but that is not its intent. The intent is to renew a commitment that has grown dull. It's a time to think seriously about who Jesus is and renew our faith from the inside out. Listen to what author Joan Chittister says about Lent.

Lent enables us to face ourselves, to see the weak places, to touch the wounds in our souls, and to be determined to try once more to live beyond our lowest aspirations. Lent is the period in which we learn to abstain from adorning at the shrine of the self. Chittister

We come to see beyond the divinity we have made of ourselves to the divine will for all of the world. Lent is a season when we look inward. We look at our frailty. We look at our brokenness. We look at all the hurt we perpetuate in the world and has been perpetuated against us. Lent is a season to look into things like suffering.

For the next six weeks, we're going to spend our Lenten season with Job. He has an auspicious start to his story. It's a bit of a heavy text. It's a really heavy story. We're not going to go verse by verse; there's a lot in there. We're going to look at the way the author of Job has designed this particular book, and we're going to lean into some of the biggest questions of the human condition. The story of Job is a raw look at the human condition. It's a

story full of suffering, full of asking deep and difficult existential questions about suffering. Questions like: How do we square a loving God with evil? How do we handle the pain and evil that exist in God's good world? Why do bad things happen to good people? These are all the questions of Job and many, many more.

Job is arguably the oldest book of the Bible that we have. There's some debate as to when Job took place. Some believe it actually happened before Moses, others maybe a little bit later. Regardless, the book is about 3,000 years old, which means humans have been wrestling with this question for 3,000 years.

I am not arrogant enough to think that in six weeks we'll solve it. We will ask questions. In some ways, I have a feeling we may end up with more questions than we did at the beginning. But yet, the story of Job is here. It is in our scriptures to allow us to wrestle with these deep questions.

Now, a little bit about the book. The genre of the Book of Job is epic poetry. This is arguably one of the more difficult books to really understand what's happening. Anytime you see poetry, it makes it a little bit more challenging to interpret what exactly is going on. But it may be helpful to think of it almost as a play, more in the line of Macbeth than, let's say, Colossians, which we went through the past six weeks. Colossians is what's called didactic, meaning it is teaching, it's prose, it's Paul writing and addressing particular things. It's a little more of an essay-type form of writing, whereas Job is poetry. Think of those kinds of classic epic poems within history. It challenges us in not only the way we come to understand it, but it's important to hold this image of poetry because it tells the story slant. It gets at us from a different angle.

That being said, the structure of the book is actually pretty straightforward. Chapters 1 and 2, which we'll look at today, are the prologue and are a little more narrative-focused. You'll identify with this. This may make a little bit more sense, although the narrative itself will raise questions. Chapters 3 through 37 are poetic dialogue, in which Job, in response to all of this suffering he just endured, will have friends come try to console him. Spoiler alert! They start out really well, and then they go sideways quickly. Chapters 38 through 41 also contain poetic dialogue, but this is now when God begins to speak into the story. We see a long poem in which he responds to Job and his friends. And then, in chapter 42, we see the epilogue, which again returns back to narrative.

## Introduction to Job

The prologue is the most important part of the Book of Job to understand. If you get the prologue wrong, you get the rest of it wrong. It's a very important section in which to understand the whole of the book because the prologue lets you and me look at what happens behind the scenes, whereas the characters of Job don't know what happens in the prologue. And that's going to be really important, so remember that. We will be let into information that Job himself will not be let into, namely this exchange between Satan and God. So, with that in mind, let's dive in.

**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. Job 1:1-3**

The narrator is simply introducing you to Job. So CPC, here he is! A man who, for all intents and purposes, so far is blameless. He is upright. He fears God. He shuns evil. This mention of 7,000 sheep, camels, donkeys, and oxen is how they say he's very wealthy. He's a man of significant means. He has a large number of servants. He's famous. Catch that last line, "*He's the greatest man among all the people of the East.*" This is an important fact that we'll get to in about six weeks, but it's important you note that the narrator is saying this man is actually quite distinct in the history of humanity. He's a different man.

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 vv. 4-5

Job's a pious man; he's a devout man. He cares for his family. He recognizes that maybe his kids are wayward, and he is going to sacrifice on their behalf. This became a regular custom for Job. He's rich. He's well-to-do. He's distinguished amongst his peers. He's pious. He's devout. He's about the best that humanity can offer. It's the image that the narrator is painting.

**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. vv. 6-7**

## The Villain

Now, the drama begins. I'm guessing, if you are skeptical of the Bible, this is about the time you're tuning out. Who is this Satan? Why is he in the presence of God? Does he just have unfettered

access to God? Those are good questions, and I want you not to set them aside. But remember the genre. This is epic poetry, which means we need to read it like literature, maybe even a bit less literal and more literarily, because that's the genre in which it's written.

The scene that's presented here is God, who's king, who's on a throne, is in a courtroom setting. It's important to catch that because what's happening in this courtroom setting is that the angels or your translation might say the sons of God, are these celestial beings that are co-ruling the earth with God. They have a level of authority. It's God who's obviously paramount among them, directing the traffic, if you will. But these angels are there, and they're presenting themselves to God. They're not just walking in front of God. That's not what that means. What they're doing is ruling the earth, and they're giving reports as to how things are going.

Then, just like any dark movie you've seen, the villain busts in through the back. I imagine the scene's dark, the doors open, and in comes this character called Satan. Now, in Hebrew, the phrase Satan is *Hasatan*, which means The Satan. Scholars aren't sure about this, but it's believed at this point that this is more of a title than it is a specific name. Remember, this was a very, very old book, and there's a particular person named Satan, but it's believed here that it's simply a title. We don't know if that's the proper name, Satan or just satan. Because the word *Hasatan* means adversary at its core, it's an adversary. In some ways, it's the other attorney in the courtroom, if you will.

He enters in through the back door (that's what I like to envision). He comes into the scene, but notice that it appears abrupt, like it wasn't necessarily planned. All of a sudden, he's there. God looks at him and addresses him. "Where have you come from?" Who are you? Who's this guy? To which the Satan responds, "I'm roaming throughout the earth, going back and forth on it." It's Satan's way of saying it's none of your business. I'm doing my thing. I'm going about the world. There is a belief that maybe he's also presenting a case, and he wants to say, "Hey, I've got some problems with you, God, and I'm here to present those issues. I'm here to present the struggles."

**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. vv. 8-11**

## The Accusation

Satan is bringing a pretty strong case against God. God opens the dialogue with, "Have you considered this man Job? Have you seen how much he loves me? He's upright. He's just. He shuns evil." And the Satan responds, "Well, of course he does, God. Look at the life you've given him! You've blessed him. You put a hedge around him. You don't let bad things happen to him."

The accusation from the Satan is twofold. First, in an honor/shame society, this is a public shaming in which the Satan is saying that Job doesn't love him for him. He loves God because of what God has given him. That's the accusation. "Job doesn't love you. No one loves you for you, God. Rather, you have created an environment where, of course, someone would love you."

But there's a second part to this accusation, which is underneath the surface of what the Satan is saying. It's the accusation that God is some corrupt manipulator, that he sits up in the heavens pulling the strings, manipulating, blessing those he wants to bless so that they'll love him, God will get what he wants, cursing others so that they can maneuver away from God.

It's this sense that he's almost like this corrupt politician, just pulling the levers of the universe to make people love him or not, to get what he desires. It's a strong accusation. And notice at the very end how the Satan is responding. "*Stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you.*" Take out all that good stuff, strike his life down, take everything he has, and then let's see if he still loves you.

Now, let's pick up in verse 12. "*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.*" Notice the way that God responds; this is really important. God responds, not by saying that he is going to strike Job down. Instead, he says, that's not what I'm about. I don't do that. That's not who I am. That's not the character I have. Rather, everything is in your power. Do you see the difference between God striking Job down and him removing his hand of protection over Job? He still maintains a semblance of power. He says that Satan can have everything that belongs to him but not the man himself.

Now, this is an important distinction. It doesn't quite get God off the hook. There's still this sense of why God would remove his hand, and does the text say why God does this? No. Let me spoil the next 42 chapters for you. We never find out! We never have any clue. If you are coming to the Book of Job for answers to the problem of evil, you will walk away with more questions. If you want to solve the problem of suffering, Job will give us some reflections on it, but it will not answer questions. It will not because it's almost as if the author of Job is actively avoiding questions. Because the reality is when God begins to speak, he names the fact that the world is infinitely complex. To try to put simple answers, trite cliches, on the complexity of the problem of suffering and evil is not what the Bible is doing.

This is hard because many of us have developed a view of the Bible in which it's some divine reference book in which we bring our questions to the scriptures, we dig for the answer, we mine it out of there, and then we carry that answer around, and that will solve our problems. Are there answers in the Bible? Absolutely. But it is not the design of the Bible. The Bible is this grand unified story from Genesis to Revelation that tells one full story: the history of God and the future of God. It is a narrative; it functions more like literature.

Yes, of course, we find answers and wisdom about life, but when we approach it as a reference book, we're using the Bible for something it was never designed to do. It's a product of the enlightenment that we have this rationality, which isn't bad, but it has its pitfalls. For Job, if you're coming to this book looking for these answers, what you're going to find is that over and over, it's going to give you a sense of that, but it's complex.

### **Tragedy**

Why did God entertain Satan's request? We don't really know, I don't know. The text doesn't say so, and certainly, Job does not know either. I believe one of the main themes of the story of Job is that it denotes that the world we live in is morally complex, challenging, and riddled with sin and brokenness. We'll unpack more as this series develops, but I wanted to just pause and say that we won't necessarily get neat and tidy answers because God seems to not want to provide them. Believe me, there's a lot that we learn, one of which is to trust. That's ultimately the end of the story. Where Job is invited is to trust the wisdom of God in an infinitely complex world. That's a little bit of where we'll be going in this. But let's look down at verse 13. The scene between God and Satan now ends, and it flashes to another scene.

**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!" vv. 13-19**

Tragedy after tragedy after tragedy befalls Job. His cattle and his donkeys die. His sheep and his servants die. His wealth is gone; his children die. Tragedy after tragedy. Remember the accusation that was coming from Satan? Job loves you because you have blessed him. So what then befalls Job?

### **Job's Response**

His stuff is taken from him. It's taken right beneath him. Look at verse 20. *"At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship..."* In response to this tragedy, we see Job, a man of deep sorrow and lament, fall down in worship; he's tearing his robe and shaving his head. These are all biblical metaphors or notes of a deep, deep lament. It's a natural response. It's the response many of us have when tragedy strikes. We respond in this lament.

Then Job says these famous words. *"and said 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart'"* (v. 21a). He says that he didn't come into this world with anything, and he was not going to leave with anything. *"The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised"* (v. 21b).

### **Who is Responsible?**

Now, I would argue that the last line, *"The Lord gave and the Lord took away. May the name of the Lord be praised,"* is probably the most famous line out of the Book of Job. It's up there probably as one of the most famous lines in all of the Old Testament. But the question I want to ask this morning is, was this true? Is it true that the Lord gave and the Lord took away? Think about it. Job was within the narrative. He did not have access to the story that we got of God and Satan in the throne room, and he never found out about it. Through the entire book of Job, he has no idea that there's this adversary, this Satan, who's up there with God. He has no clue about what's happening. And what did we just say? Did God actually take away all those things that Job had? The answer is no. Who did that? Satan.

So what do we do with a line in which Job says, *"The Lord gave, and the Lord took away? May the name of the Lord be praised?"* First thing, it's a pretty profound statement of faith that he is enduring all of that and still comes before God in worship and has the ability to say the name of the Lord be praised. That is a profoundly beautiful line in the very fact that he didn't know everything that was going on, and he comes through that. I mean, that is a profound statement. That demonstration of faith is profound, but it doesn't advocate that this statement is actually true. The rest of the book is about Job, his friends, this other friend named Elihu, and God essentially deliberating, I believe, on that particular line.

The reason it's in there is actually to maybe prove its opposite meaning that the Lord doesn't take away. Think of the logic in Job's mind: God killed all of his oxen. God took his wealth. God killed his family. That's the image. In Job's logic, that's the picture. But again, there's this Satan, this one who causes destruction,

this whole other character, this adversary that perpetuates evil in the world. God is involved; we're aware of that. He isn't totally removed. He actually has quite a bit of control over what's happening here. But it's chaotic. It's random. It's haphazard that Satan is running about causing all of these things.

See, the whole thing wasn't God's idea. Remember, Satan entered into the story. We'll see towards the end that this mirrors a lot of the biblical narrative. Think of Genesis 1. The story begins with God creating goodness and shalom and perfection. And it's the freedom, the free will of humans, that begins this process of this destruction of sin that comes in Genesis 3.

So God is culpable only insofar as he allows free will. It isn't God perpetuating it. It's the free will he's given to Satan and these other sons of gods or angels, in which they have this ability, which mirrors the freedom that we received in Genesis 1 and 2. We have the freedom to either live into the direction of God to bring about shalom and healing or the opposite.

Notice, by the way, who came in Genesis 3—the serpent. What does the serpent ask the humans? Does God really love you? What's Satan doing here? He asked God, do people really love you? He's sowing seeds of division, of chaos, of brokenness. The questions we get here are: why does this happen? It is deeply disorienting because sin and brokenness are disorienting. It is not the intention of God. It doesn't come from God. Why would God allow this innocent man to suffer? Why does God allow this favored chosen and innocent one to go through suffering? We don't really know. The answer is far more complex than any answer we can give.

However, what we do recognize early on in this text is that God has an asymmetrical relationship to suffering. That's a phrase I took from Tim Keller, who said, "God has an asymmetrical relationship," meaning it doesn't mesh perfectly with suffering. As you read the stories, you'll notice that at times, it does appear God sends suffering, but yet here, clearly, it wasn't God who perpetuated that. So we're left with this tension of what does this suffering actually mean?

Well, God has an asymmetrical relationship to suffering. It isn't that he perpetuated it, but rather it is, and it exists. He gives us this free will, and it's in this way that we wrestle with God. We have to wrestle with what this all means. You see, in a room this size, there's a lot of suffering. I know because I sit with many of you over coffee and other meetings. It's marriages on the brink of disaster. There's life that didn't turn out the way it should. There are wayward children. There's a diagnosis. There's the loss of loved ones. We may not all experience the magnitude of Job's suffering, but certainly, collectively, we could bring a story of suffering. What do we do with that suffering?

*"Naked I came, naked I'll return. The Lord gives, the Lord takes away. The name of the Lord be praised."* Job, in these early chapters, is



holding it together. He holds onto his integrity. But we know, if you've read the story before, in a few chapters, he begins to unravel, and could you blame him? What I love about this part in the story of Job is that you see his faith, and then, through the rest of it, you'll see his honesty, where he begins to cry out to God and make accusations against God. "God, you are unjust. I've been righteous. You owe me."

## Chaos

Most of us operate with the logic of Job's friends that we reap what we sow. That's actually a very biblical idea, but it's more complex than that. Most of us think that if I bless God if I go to church for decade after decade, then he owes me; he'll bless me. We're good enough to know we'd never say that out loud, but it's the operating way we live.

But the image we're getting early on is suffering is chaotic. It's what's in Genesis 1. There's this phrase in Genesis, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, and the earth was formless and void." That word in Hebrew is a fun one to say, *tohu va-vohu*, and it means chaos. You could translate it as unreality. So when God is creating the earth, he creates it, but it's got this sense of chaos, this voidness, this unreality about it. All of the creation story is God taking this chaos and forming it, putting it into order. He's separating light from darkness, land from sea. He's organizing the chaos.

But what happens in chapter 3 is that he told the humans whom he created to go fill the earth and subdue it, which is God's way of saying to co-create with him. He is giving us sovereignty. He is giving us some authority over the world, not the same as God's, but he's giving us a level of that. He's inviting us to create with him. That's what it means to be an image bearer. It means that we go out into the world and reflect God into the world, living in the same way and ruling over creation in the same way God would.

But the problem is that Satan duped Adam and Eve by challenging God. He's asking if God really has their best interest in mind. We see Adam and Eve take from the tree. They said, "No. I'll define right and wrong." And what is unleashed is *tohu va-vohu*, unreality, de-creation. In some ways, you don't create evil; you uncreate into evil. Does that make sense? God is creating and ordering the world in such a way, and when sin enters the picture, it's us undoing the things that God is doing.

In Job, Satan is saying that he will strike Job. Take everything he has. As God has given him goodness—God is a good God—Satan will devolve, take away, uncreate the goodness and descend into *tohu va-vohu*. Chaos, formlessness, void, that's what sin is.

Then, there's a line where Adam and Eve are cast out of the garden. And there's another line that says that they were then in the land of Nod, east of Eden. That's where Steinbeck got the title

for his book *East of Eden*, which deals with human brokenness, sin, and the fallout of all of that which is evil.

## East of Eden

Friends, we live east of Eden. I don't know for sure, but I have a hunch that the reason the author starts in verse one with "in the Land of Uz," which no one really knows where that, is, but I wonder if it's just a subtle nod to the fact that you're not in Eden. You're not in the created goodness. You're east of it. Friends, life is hard in the east of Eden. Life is broken. It's terrible east of Eden. You know that. You feel it. Live for any amount of time, and you'll experience this suffering. The reality of Job that is so harsh is that either you are in the midst of a season like Job, you're coming out of it, or you'll probably be entering into it. East of Eden is hard. It's terrible. Death is terrible. War is terrible. Disease is terrible. Broken marriages and relationships are terrible. We look directly at that and say, "God, this is not the way it should be."

Here's the beautiful thing about Job's response. Of all the characters—pay attention as we read through this—Job is the only one who talks to God. Everyone else in the story talks about God. The friends talk about God. But Job talks to God. That's an important distinction. It's a distinction that we need to understand because of all of this suffering. I invite you not to brush it aside. You can bring all of that brokenness that is east of Eden. You can bring that before God. Don't talk about God; bring it to him. Talk to God.

I haven't shared a lot about this, but we've had a tough year. I've been reflecting a lot on that, and it's largely good now. We're on the other side of a season of what I would say is suffering. What's been interesting is that on the other side of it, I have found myself talking to God in a different way than I did before. And it's through a season like that that I pray, and I've been holding on in certain areas. I don't want to make it seem more dramatic than it is, but it's been a tough year. And I'm holding on to that, asking God, "I'm here. I don't understand." I've asked a lot of why questions. Why God? Why this? Why did this occur? Why did this take place? And God hasn't given an answer.

To be honest, I'm a little bit frustrated with the Book of Job, too, because it also means the prospect of an answer may not be there. But I'm holding on. And God has been good. Throughout all of it, I've seen these little drops of God present, but I've had to wrestle with the fact that I may not get answers to my why in some of these things. But God has been good to us and walks through with us. I've been able to talk to God, whereas before, I talked a lot about God.

If I were to summarize everything from this space, it's not the answer as to why God allowed Satan to cause Job suffering; I'd rather summarize in almost one simple statement about your posture in the midst of suffering. Again, I don't know why you're experiencing the thing you are. I don't know why you're going

through that suffering, but what I want to land on is this. I pray that you and I can learn to allow suffering to drive you to God.

Life east of Eden is difficult. It is hard. There's no doubt about it. And you will experience the sting of life east of Eden. Lent affords us this opportunity to remind ourselves that even Jesus endured suffering. He walked into the wilderness, led by the Spirit, in order to be tempted by Satan. And where we fail, where Job will fail, where his friends will fail, Jesus will not fail. He will endure that suffering and that pain on our behalf. And take solace, my friends, that east of Eden, we may not have answers, but you do have a God who knows how to bleed and suffer. You have a God who also cried out, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" This is eerily similar to Job's cries in this book.

### **Beauty from Ashes**

Whatever season you are in, may you come to the realization that life east of Eden is difficult. It is painful, but you can bring that to God. And as we walk through this, we're going to talk about the different ways that Job's friends try to solve this problem. We'll unpack how they actually aren't quite right.

So, in some ways, may we mirror the words "May the name of the Lord be praised," but at the same time, may we hold the intention that God isn't quite the one who's causing this either. We don't know, but may we hold to God and allow our suffering to move us closer to God. That's the gift, the invitation of God in the midst of it.

Romans talks about how God will work all things for the good of those who love him. It doesn't mean he causes all things. It doesn't say that in Romans. It simply says that in the mess of the brokenness of the world, God will take it and bring something beautiful out of it. Because that's who God is. That's what God does. From Genesis to Revelation, he's taking the goodness of creation that was distorted and broken by powers of evil, of humanness, and all of those sorts of things, and he's bringing it to Revelation 21, where he says, "I'm bringing something more beautiful out of it."

Throughout the Scriptures, you see these stories over and over. That's the refrain; that's the melody of Scripture. Over and over, God takes ugliness and turns it into beauty. We long for the day in which Christ is all in all. It's what Paul talked about in Galatians. This is the hope we have. So, Church, whatever you're going through, may you allow it to move you to God.

I just sensed that there was a heaviness in this message. So, I invite you to remember that God is present with you and hold your heaviness and suffering before God. The brokenness, pain,

and suffering are not okay. They are not God's intention. God will use it, but it is not his intention.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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