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## Job and Suffering

Texts: **Job 1:1, 2:1-10; Hebrews 1: 1-4;, 2: 5-12;** Rob Bell *Me Too*

In the Roman Catholic Church, it's hard to become a saint. Of course they have to investigate your life. You have to have good deeds, a good reputation, and two miracles attributed to you. I think that last bit would be the hardest! During the process, a canon lawyer is appointed to dig up dirt on you and make the argument that you should *not* be canonized as a saint. This canon lawyer was officially called 'the promoter of the faith', but everyone knows them by their other name: the Devil's Advocate.

The Devil's Advocate is the con to everyone else's pro, the person who had to hold up his hand and say, "Hang on, now, let's not be too hasty. What about this?" The Devil's Advocate tried to build a case against you and your faith. If your life couldn't stand up to that level of scrutiny, maybe you weren't a saint after all. Now, obviously the canon lawyer wasn't really opposed to you as a person. It was the role he had to play in the process. And he had to do it well to make sure that only worthy people with no dark and hidden secrets made it through to sainthood.

As the book of Job begins, we see Satan arrive in the heavenly council before God. At least that's how it's translated. But immediately I have to point out to you that that's not what the Hebrew text says. The Hebrew word 'hasatan' means 'the accuser'; it's not a personal name. The Hebrew text clearly says that '*the* satan', that is, *the accuser* arrived in the council. And his job is much like that of the Devil's Advocate. He is there to ask the hard questions that need to be asked. So put aside all the connotations that the word Satan has and realize that this dialogue that is going on in the heavenly council is not God and the Devil making a bet or debating about Job's faith.

The accuser is asking a hard question about Job, and about the nature of faith. It's not fire and brimstone devil stuff here. It's a role within the heavenly council, just like the Devil's Advocate questions a proposed saint's life and faith, not out of personal animus, but out of a need to investigate and discover the truth.

Of course, the book isn't the story of a real person at all. "There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job" gives it away immediately. It might as well begin "Once upon a time in the land of Uz" or "A long time ago, in a place far, far away...." The author signals to us immediately that it's an extended story. We aren't really to imagine that God is having a conversation with the accuser and then allowing the accuser to ruin Job's life financially - by having all his livestock stolen - and ruin his life emotionally - by having all his sons and daughters killed - as happens in chapter 1. Nor should we think, as we heard from chapter 2 today, that while Job is still sitting amidst the ashes of grief, the accuser is allowed to afflict Job's body with sores, so that there's nothing left for him to do but scrape himself with a piece of a broken pot. That would be horrible of God to do that.

The point of the first two chapters is to establish some facts for the rest of the story. The first is that Job really is blameless and upright. The narrator says so in chapter 1, verse 1, and then God says it in chapter 2, verse 3. This, too, points to the fact that this is a theological story meant to teach us, and not a personal history meant to frighten us. No human is ever totally blameless and upright, with no sin whatsoever. But the message of the book depends on Job's blamelessness, so this is where it begins, with both the narrator and God stating it outright.

This is an incredibly important point for the whole book. Job really is blameless. He is upright. His bad fortune does not come upon him because he has committed some sin. We have to know this going in to the discussion of suffering and faith, or we will miss the point entirely.

Now, in the ancient world, they had a simple calculus about suffering: if you sinned, eventually your sin would cause you to suffer. It was only just. A bit like a karma thing: your sin was going to find you out in the end, because of the way that God had established the world. Warnings about sin were for your own protection. Sin has consequences built in, and you would suffer eventually. But sometimes people back then mixed up cause and effect. It's one thing to say that, if you sin, you're going to suffer for it. It's a completely different thing to say that, because you are suffering, you must have sinned. It's like saying, if you stand in the rain, you're going to get wet. But that's totally different than saying, if you're wet, you must have been standing in the rain. Maybe you took a shower. Maybe you were swimming. There are lots of reasons you might be wet besides standing in the rain. Or it's like saying, if you are in Cleveland, you must be in Ohio. That's right. But it's not right to say, if you are in Ohio, you must be in Cleveland. Maybe you're in Columbus, or Cincinnati.

Same with suffering. If you commit a sin, you're probably going to suffer, because that's the way the world works. But if you're suffering, it's not necessarily true that it's because you sinned. Most of the book of Job is about Job and his three friends who come to comfort him. The three friends aren't very good at this comforting thing, because they urge Job to repent of the sin that, in their minds, he's obviously committed to bring this disaster upon himself. When Job insists that he knows of no sin that's he's committed - which we readers know is true, because we heard the dialogue in heaven in chapters 1 and 2 - his friends don't believe him. They are so certain of their worldview, that suffering is because of sin, that they attack Job and insist that he must have committed a sin to be suffering so. One purpose of the book of Job is to tell us that that's not true. Suffering isn't necessarily caused by sin.

We see the same way of looking at sin and suffering in the New Testament. In John 9, verse 2, Jesus' disciples say to Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned - this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" And Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." Both the book of Job, and Jesus himself, affirm that there is no necessary link between righteousness and prosperity, and sinfulness and suffering.

All too often in American life, and in American Christianity, we make this mistake. The wealthy are held up as paragons of hard work and virtue, while the poor are considered lazy and full of vice.

I mean, if they really were hard working, they wouldn't be poor, right? They wouldn't be suffering! They'd be rich. The fact that they often work 80 hours a week, at three minimum wage jobs to get by, should tell us this is false.

But in case we missed it, the Scripture here says, "No, you can't make that connection. Prosperity does not equal virtue, and suffering does not equal vice." Virtue may be the cause of your prosperity as God's blessing, but so might cunning, deceitfulness and grifting. Suffering and poverty may be a consequence of sin, but it might also be from misfortune or racism or a system that didn't give you a fair chance.

The book of Job is here to tell us that suffering isn't necessarily because of sin. Sometimes people are looking for answers to *why there is suffering at all* from the book of Job. Job doesn't really give us that. It doesn't tell us why there is suffering. But it does tell us that suffering isn't always just or fair based

on our personal virtue. I think we all know this intuitively, but there are powerful forces in the world that want you to believe that vast inequalities of wealth, health, and happiness are simply the consequences of virtue and vice.

But let us return to the Devil's Advocate for a second, to the accuser. His accusation isn't that Job is suffering because of his sin. His accusation is that Job's faithfulness is because of his earlier prosperity, before any of the calamities that cause Job to suffer had happened. The accuser says that Job's faith in God is only because God has blessed Job. Take away the blessings of material prosperity and family, and Job will curse you God, instead of honor you.

This is a deep question of the nature of faith: do we believe because we are going to get something out of it, like prosperity or even like eternal life? Or do we believe because we love the character of God, God's kindness, God's mercy, God's creativeness, God's justice and God's love for us? The accuser says, if you take away the blessing from Job, you will take away Job's faith, too. And God says, "No, I know Job, and his faith and trust in me will remain, even when it is assailed by doubts caused by suffering."

The accuser is allowed to bring suffering on innocent Job as a trial of Job's faithfulness, but also as a testimony to it. Job's faith remains strong even when the world looks at his miserable state and says, as Job's poor suffering wife says to him (for she has also lost her wealth and her children), "Just curse God and die." That is, even when it looks like Job has nothing left to live for, Job remains faithful, accepting both good and bad fortune from God.

Job is, of course, the idealized believer at this point in the story. He is the foil to the accuser's complaint that faithful people are only faithful because of God's blessings to them. Job is held up as a model for us to aspire too, a model of remaining trusting and faithful even in the midst of adversity.

In real life, it's much harder. No one, I think, is faithful to God for completely selfless reasons. Yes, we may love God's character and be admiring of God's creativity. But the prospect of eternal life is also an inducement in the love we feel for God. That's just human. We needn't feel ashamed of that.

The accuser asks tough questions of faith to force us to look at our own faith and to seek to love God for God's own sake more than we love God for our own sake, but that's a journey we're on, and no one is there yet. And when adversity strikes us, when we are in the midst of suffering, of course we feel that God is far away, or maybe even completely absent. That, too, is human, and even Job, *faithful* Job, feels that way too, later in the book. But that is a sermon for next week, when we will return to Job again and the mystery of God's seeming absence.

For now, it's enough to remember that those who suffer are not necessarily suffering because of sinfulness or through some fault of their own. The innocent can suffer, too, and the wicked can prosper.

And it's enough to start on the journey of loving God for God's own sake, and not just because of God's blessings to us. As we move along that path, we follow Job in responding to the accuser's slights, and we build a case that our faith in God is more than just a selfish desire for blessing. Our faith in God is a response to God's love for us, and an admiration for the character of God, who would come for us in Jesus Christ.

Amen