

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

2000 BC Job Speaks to 2020 Us

(the book of Job)

Study #1

Sermon series: When Life Hits Hard

(selected studies in biblical characters whom life hit hard)

Introduction: Apology for a series...

Sermons don't develop in a vacuum and sermon series don't, either. The series of messages that begins today arrives courtesy of our current cultural disruption.

Societies like ours move through seasons of tranquility and optimism - and there are other seasons. We find ourselves in one that is marked by upheaval, rapid change, divisiveness, and fear.

In recent months, our lives have not only been hit hard by the sickness caused by the virus, but by attendant consequences to families, friendships, church, school, and business.

A lot of things in our world look very different than they did in January. and there's no telling what things will look like on lots of fronts in a few weeks or months, much less in a year or two.

We wonder, "*What's next? Will I and those I love be OK?*"

Throughout the Bible, we read the stories of men and women who were hit hard by life. We gain insight and inspiration from those stories and we're going to see what we can learn from a few of them in the weeks to come.

I'm kicking off this series today by looking at a biblical character with whom you may or may not be familiar.

Introduction to the book of Job...

This man lived two thousand years before Jesus.¹ Today, we'll consider the life and times of the patriarch, Job.

Job's book winds up on most everyone's list of the 100 greatest books of all time.² It is historical narrative and poetry and courtroom drama and wisdom literature all rolled into one *magnum opus*.

It's great literature, but there's much about the book that we don't know.

For instance, we don't know who wrote the book of Job³ or the physical location where the action took place.⁴

But the main theme of the book is clear, as I hope to make clear as we go along.⁵

¹ Bible scholar and archaeologist W. F. Albright believed that Job lived during the time of the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob), which dates him around 2000 BC.

² The Scottish philosopher and author, Thomas Carlyle wrote, "*There is nothing written, I think, in the Bible or out of it, of equal literary merit.*" Lots of people agree with Carlyle.

³ Some scholars deny the single authorship of Job, believing that the prose prologue and epilogue must have been written by a different author than the one who wrote the poetic middle section. However, the prose-poetry-prose format is found elsewhere in northern African literature, dating from around 1900 BC. Literacy was widespread in the Ancient Near East, even as early as the early part of the second millennium, BC. Thus, while the message of Job may have been faithfully transmitted via oral tradition (a very reliable means of passing down stories *verbatim* through many centuries), it is very possible that the story was written down shortly after the events and the dialogue took place.

⁴ The first chapter tells us that Job lived in Uz, thought to be an ancient name of the land of Edom, south and east of the Dead Sea. Picture a desert-like region (1:19) that has areas fertile enough to sustain agriculture and livestock (1:3, 14; 42:12).

⁵ The structure and flow of the book of Job: Chapters 1-2 - the devastating upheavals to Job's life; 3-31 - a series of speeches, given as poetry, from Job and his three friends; 32-37 - Elihu's speech; 38-41 - the speeches of God; 42 - Job's repentance, his advocacy for his friends, and his restoration.

My first exposure to the book was in a High School literature class and I've loved it ever since.

I hope you will come to love it this morning and that our time considering Job's story will equip you to thrive when life hits hard.

Job's Pan-Suffering (Job 1-2)

Meet Job

Right out of the chute we learn that Job was a really good man.

He was a God-honoring leader of a large family and was the father of three grown daughters and seven grown sons. This means, of course, that he must have been a seasoned citizen. Many scholars guess that Job was about 64 years of age. (☺)

He was also very wealthy and had lots of servants to watch over his large herds and flocks of sheep, camels, oxen, and donkeys.

The opening verses tell us that he was "*the greatest of all the men of the east*" and that he was "*blameless, upright, fearing God and turning away from evil.*"

Spoiler alert:

If you don't already know this, I'll tell you now that the life of this good man is about to turn very messy and that God-fearing Job is going to struggle to find his footing while going through his mess.

Realize that if the life of someone as good and godly as Job could get messy, yours and mine could, too. If his life fell apart at the seams, so could ours.

And if Job - of all people! - struggled to navigate that mess with a godly attitude, you and I are likely to struggle, too, when life hits hard.

So, we're on high alert. We're listening. Intently.

As the story begins, Job had a great life. It was heaven on earth. All of that is about to change, though, thanks to a scene that takes us from earth to heaven.

A Heavenly Wager

In heaven, God was holding council with His spiritual agents, what we would call angels.

One of them, referred to here as *The Accuser* (Hebrew "*the satan*" - not a proper name), showed up and said that Job was leading a godly life only because God allowed life to work so well for him.

The Accuser dared God to remove the "hedge" of protection (1:10) from Job - "*Let Job suffer and he'll curse You to Your face.*"

Well, God took the bet and allowed *The Accuser*, first, to touch all that Job had, but to not touch Job, personally. In a second scene, God allowed *The Accuser* to afflict Job's body with physical pain but did not allow him to kill Job.

The books' opening two chapters describe the awful losses Job suffered as a result of God's agreement to allow *The Accuser* to afflict him.

Of course, Job knows nothing of these negotiations. He is just living his life, when his life falls apart, in two stages.

Life, Disrupted

Round one - touching all that Job has (Job 1:13-19)

In one day - seemingly, while Job was sitting in an easy chair on his back deck - he received news that:

- a tribe of Sabeans had attacked and killed the servants who were tending his oxen and donkeys and stolen all the animals.
- fire had fallen from heaven (a lightning storm? something overtly supernatural?) and burned up Job's thousands of sheep along with the servants who were watching them.

- the Chaldeans raided his herds of camels, took them, and killed the servants watching the camels.
- a great wind blew down the house in which Job's three daughters and seven sons were feasting, killing them all.

One day. Total devastation. Everything he owned, gone. His family obliterated. Not long afterward, *The Accuser's* attacked again.

Round two - touching Job

[7] Then Satan went out from the presence of the LORD and smote Job with sore boils from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head.

There is not much that is more personal to us than our skin and by this attack every inch of Job's skin was afflicted by a terrible disease.

The people of his city have quarantined him (ancient peoples were terrified of skin diseases) and when we locate him, he is scraping his skin with a shard of pottery while sitting in the town dump.

The pain Job endured was complete. His physical misery matched the personal agony of his recent losses.⁶

But Job's response was exactly what God had told *the accuser* it would be. After the loss of his children and possessions, we read this.

Job's God-Honoring Responses

[20] Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head, and he fell to the ground and worshiped. [21] He said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, And naked I shall return there. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD."

⁶ Job tells us later that his body is clothed with worms and scabs, his skin is broken and festering (7:5), he's nothing but skin and bones (16:8), weeps non-stop and can't sleep (16:16), is in constant pain (30:17) and burns with fever (30:30).

After his second loss of health and community support, and even after his wife suggested that he just "**curse God and die**",⁷ we read -

[Job 2:10]... "You speak as one of the foolish women speaks. Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

Job never considered that *The Accuser* was the cause of his sufferings. He didn't blame the weather, other people, or even himself.

He simply worshipped.

Would to God that I would respond as well to my own lower-case suffering as Job did to his own **SUFFERING**.

Job has done as well as God had predicted he would when the heavenly wager with *The Accuser* was struck.

There is more to come, of course, and the battle isn't yet won. But, to this point, Job is doing great and has not sinned "**with his lips**."

Not long after these disasters hit, three men heard through the 2,000 BC grapevine that their friend, Job, was hurting. They got there as fast as they could.

Job and His Friends

Wounded Job and His Helpful, Silent Friends

Their only reason for going to Job was "**to sympathize with him and comfort him**." (2:11)

Their first ten days with him were extremely therapeutic. They sat in silence and gave Job the beautiful gift of presence.

Then the speaking began, and things turned ugly, quick.

⁷ 2:9 - I wonder if this was a suggestion to end her husband's unimaginable pain.

Wordy Friends Shoot the Wounded Job

The next twenty-nine chapters (3-31) of this book consist of speeches given by Job and by his three friends.

We obviously won't spend time exploring what is said in these speeches, but I'll tell you that there is a steady progression by all four men into extremely unhealthy thinking and unhelpful ways of relating.

These friends told Job to repent of whatever sin he was guilty that had prompted God to punish him.⁸

What they had to say to Job showed an amazing lack of insight into the ways of God, zero sensitivity to their friend's suffering, and no hint of reflectiveness. They were nothing but insensitive clods.

The friends should have stayed silent. Their words only further wounded the already crushed Job.

Sadly, and maybe because he was goaded there by his friends', Job didn't do very well, either.

Job's Slide into Ugly Demandingness

He moved from understandable and healthy lament to problematic complaining to toxic accusing.

As time passed, he slid into bitterness and by degrees he turned to accusing God of injustice.

By the end of his speeches, Job actually demanded an audience with God to air his grievances. He's confident that he would win at trial against God for having dealt with him so badly.

⁸ From elsewhere in the book, though, we learn that Job was highly respected (29:7-11), was a fair and honest judge (29:7, 12-17), was a wise counselor (29:21-24), an honest employer (31:13-15; 38-39), and hospitable and generous to those in need (31:16-21)

At the end of his 9th (!) and final speech, none of Job's friends have any response. As they sat silent, though, there was a young man present, Elihu, who was thoroughly frustrated with what these four older men had said. Elihu took them all on.

He roundly rebuked the three friends for knowing nothing and for being terrible friends. But he also challenged Job for his self-righteous pride. (33:8-13; 35:1-15) He spoke of how God could use suffering redemptively. (33:14-30; 36:1-37:22)

Elihu accused Job of sin,⁹ NOT of sin that brought about his losses. He accused Job of the sin of demandingness AFTER his great losses. He called Job to repentance in light of God's majestic holiness.

When Elihu ended his own speech, Job sat silent. Job's silence paved the way for the next Speaker.

Imagine Job, sitting on the ash heap on the edge of town. All is calm. Job sits with arms crossed. He says nothing. Admits to nothing.

Suddenly, a storm blows up. It comes out of nowhere. The storm gets everyone's attention. We should picture the scene. There is darkness and wind. The author refers to a "*whirlwind*" Think tornado and "freight train" loud.

Above the roar of the whirlwind, we hear a Voice.

Job and His God (Job 38-41)

God's "Welcome" (38:1-3)

***[38:1] Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind and said,
[2] "Who is this that darkens counsel
By words without knowledge?
[3] "Now gird up your loins like a man,
And I will ask you, and you instruct Me!"***

⁹ At one point, responding to Job's accusation against God, he said, ***[33:12] "...You are not right in this,
For God is greater than man.***

At that moment, Job realized that he was in way over his head. Like the dog who chased and then caught the car, he's now not sure what to do.

A face-to-face showdown with God sounded like a good idea in the abstract, but now that he's facing God, he's certain it wasn't such a good idea.

God and Nature (38:4--39:30)

God took the floor and for four full chapters of the book He put Job in his place.

God asks questions. They are rhetorical questions asked with a point. The point of these questions is to highlight what Job does NOT know and to zero in on what Job can NOT do.

The topics range from the creation of the earth and sea, to the constellations in the night sky, to the morning sunrise and to rain, snow, and hail.

God is making a case that He has put together an extremely complex, highly ordered system that works very well.

God's words to Job are to say, *"Tell Me again, Job, just how did you put all of these systems together? Great job on gravity, tides, the food chain, and the hydrologic cycle, by the way."*

God's words drip with sarcasm. And He's only just begun.

God shifts to consider certain animals whose ways are secretive or confounding or sublime.

He asks Job probing questions about ravens and hawks and eagles, wild oxen and donkeys and deer, lions and horses and ostriches.

He asks stuff that nobody but God knows and He could have gone on and on.

He could have spoken of black holes, reproduction, and that amazing molecule H₂O.

THAT is God's speech.

Job says, *"God, You have been unjust. You've dealt me a lousy hand."* God gives Job a lesson in the birds and the seas and tells him, *"Job, you don't have enough information to pass judgment on Me."*

And God's only half-way through. In what follows, God introduces two creatures for Job's consideration.

Two Special Creatures (40:15--41:34)

There is great debate about the identities of these creatures. Some say that they are the hippopotamus and the crocodile; others say that they are two Ancient Near Eastern mythical creatures; others claim that they are what we would call today dinosaurs or are extinct.

While I lean toward taking them as a hippopotamus and a crocodile, I'm going to refer to them as Behemoth and Leviathan.

Behemoth (40:15-24)

God describes Behemoth as massive and mighty. He's got no fear of anything. He can't be captured, and he's calm in the middle of a raging river.

God makes a remark about Behemoth in the middle of the section that describes him. We should notice this:

[19] "He is the first of the ways of God; Let his maker bring near his sword."

That's a literal translation of the Hebrew and it may be God, sarcastically inviting Job to bring his own sword to tame Behemoth.

Or it might be that Eugene Peterson, who rendered it differently in The Message, has the better sense of it:
*Most magnificent of all My creatures
I still lead him around like a lamb.*

Behemoth is untamable. All creation is subservient to Behemoth - and God created and tamed Behemoth.

Job raises himself up against God while Behemoth knows his place before his Maker.

While Job is letting those words sink in, God moves to consider a beast even wilder than Behemoth. Here, we meet Leviathan, what I might call a crocodile on steroids.

Leviathan (41:1-34)

You can teach a cow or a horse to serve you. You can train a dog to walk with you. She'll sit at your feet.

Not Leviathan. He'll never submit to you.

You can't play with him. You can't go to war against him. It's best to stay out of his way because coupled with his physical strength, he's got an attitude and a hair-trigger temper.¹⁰

God has described these creatures to Job to make a point.

And the point is...

And the point is that if such mighty monsters as Behemoth and Leviathan submit to God, so should Job submit to God.

Job made the common mistake of believing that suffering allowed him to pass judgment on God. That somehow the created can stand in judgment of the Creator.

For all their wildness, Behemoth and even Leviathan have one up on Job in that they know their place before God.

¹⁰ Scholars have noted that God devoted more time to describing Leviathan than He did to Behemoth, implying that Job has more in common with Leviathan than with Behemoth? More stubbornness. More haughty pride. More rebellion.

So, what will Job do now that he has been confronted with this humiliating comparison where he comes in third behind these two mighty beasts?

Listen. The effect of all of this on Job is immediate and profound.

Job's Repentance and Restoration

True and Genuine Repentance (42:1-5)

[1] Then Job answered the LORD and said...

Notice. Job speaks. Here, Job's words express the genuineness of his repentance.¹¹

It may be that you have received some blows from life recently that have left you reeling. You've been in pain. It may have something to do with COVID-19 and it may not.

Have you accused God of mismanaging your life? Have you called His justice into question?

If you have, it may be that as of this moment you've become aware of how wrong that response is.

You've heard God's words to Job and you now own the idea that bitterness against God and accusing God of injustice is ugly.

It's a good thing to recognize this. But don't stop with simple recognition. Follow Job's lead. Speak.

¹¹ At the end of God's first speech, Job said, ***[40:4] Behold, I am insignificant; what can I reply to You? I lay my hand on my mouth. [5] Once I have spoken, and I will not answer; Even twice, and I will add nothing more.***

He had no words, a signal to God that His work was not finished. When Job was thoroughly broken, there would be words. Truly repentant people have words.

If you're looking for words to say, you could do worse than to use Job's words.

**[2] "I know that You can do all things,
And that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted.
[3] 'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?'
"Therefore I have declared that which I did not understand,
Things too wonderful for me, which I did not know."
[4] 'Hear, now, and I will speak;
I will ask You, and You instruct me.'
[5] "I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear;
But now my eye sees You;
[6] Therefore I retract,
And I repent in dust and ashes."**

Job exults in God's inscrutability (un-figure-out-able-ness) and joyfully makes an "about face."

If the massive Behemoth and the malicious Leviathan can live willingly under God's authority, so can he. So can I. So can you.

Job withdraws his complaint against God. He no longer accuses God of injustice because he has seen something of God's goodness, this immortal, invisible, God only wise. He submits, he yields to God.

But that's not the end of the book. What follows is crucial, for Job and for us to see.

God speaks again. This time, though, He doesn't speak to Job but to Job's three friends.

Ministry (Being God's Agent with others) (Job 42:9-10)

[7] It came about after the LORD had spoken these words to Job, that the LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite, "My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends, because you have not spoken of Me what is right as My servant Job has."

Yes, Eliphaz and Bildad and Zophar certainly proved to be horrible friends to Job. They offered him zero compassion and comfort.

But God didn't take them to task for that. He called them on the carpet for what they had to say about Him, which was:

Suffering is always the result of sin. One sin, one suffering. If you suffer a lot, you must have sinned a lot. Live well and your life will go well.

According to these guys, there is no such thing as innocent suffering. Their view is cold and calculating. It doesn't take into account the randomness of life or the brokenness of the world.¹²

They don't know what to do with the victims of COVID-19 or a Minnesota flood or cancer or a car wreck.

Theirs is a false theology, a heresy of the first order.

But Job's "friends" have not only been factually wrong. They have been tools of *The Accuser*.

They attacked Job when he was most vulnerable and succeeded in tempting this good man to **"curse God to His face,"** - *The Accuser's* aim from the start.

God graciously gives these men an assignment that will bring forgiveness.

[8a] "Now therefore, take for yourselves seven bulls and seven rams and go to My servant Job and offer up a burnt offering for yourselves, and My servant Job will pray for you."

Offering a sacrifice forces them to admit that they have sinned, and that's important. But they need something else. They need an advocate. They need someone to go to bat for them before God - and God knows just the man.

Imagine how humbling it would be for these guys to approach Job and ask for his advocacy - *"Job, would you pray for us?"* They had so failed miserably to advocate for him when he needed and had even begged for it.

¹² We call their belief system "retribution theology."

It would have been hard for them to approach Job. But put yourself in Job's shoes as you watch them come to you and as you hear them ask for your prayer support.

Showing kindness to a friend or to an innocent stranger in need can be challenging, but we're usually willing to do that. It's a tougher assignment to showing kindness to a friend who has just stabbed us in the back.

So...what will Job do?

THIS is the crisis moment of the book! This - when Job is commissioned by God to pray for Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar - is the acid test of Job's repentance.

The Accuser had said that if Job suffered loss, he would no longer trust or worship or serve God.

God pushed all His chips to the center of the table and bet on Job to come through. The outcome of the cosmic wager hangs in the balance. What will Job do?

Watch.

[9] So Eliphaz the Temanite and Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite went and did as the LORD told them; and the LORD accepted Job. [10] The LORD restored the fortunes of Job when he prayed for his friends.

Job's friends never prayed for Job. They attacked him. But Job prayed for them. He advocated for these three men who had treated him so badly.

And by Job's faithful service to God, *The Accuser* has been defeated and God has been vindicated.

Among the most impressive acts of sacrificial love we see anywhere in the Bible is Job, offering intercessory prayer for Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar.¹³

His prayer for his enemy/friends proves the genuineness of his repentance from his sin of accusing God of injustice.

And here is the message for each of us, today, even when life hits hard.

Bringing the blessing of God to those around us - friends, family, strangers, and enemies - is as much our calling as it was Job's.

Today, God wins when we pray. Our enemy loses every time we bless those who do us dirty. Jesus' kingdom advances when, even when we are hurting, we love and serve in His Name.

This is what it means to be "on mission" for Jesus' Great Commission. And that is the message of Job.

Now, we're almost finished. We're about to see Job's restoration and the increase of all his possessions. Yes!

Hold it. What? He hasn't been restored yet? Nope.

Remember that the key question in the whole drama is this: Will Job serve God (1:8; 2:3) despite suffering?

It turns out that the answer is "Yes!" - because through everything we've seen so far this morning, Job is still suffering.

¹³ Edith Schaeffer: There is an amazing forgiveness shown in Job's willingness to pray for his friends, rather than to gloat over them. It would do us good...to recognize the opportunities that we have...to pray for people who have hurt us. We should pray with a desire that others may come to an understanding of the truth...rather than with a desire that they be proven wrong. Or, to quote Larry Crabb, "*Recovery from terrible mistreatment is never meaningful until the victim hungers for the restoration of the abuser and is even willing to be an instrument of that restoration.*" ([Finding God](#))

A common misunderstanding of this book is to see Job's repentance followed by his restoration followed by his prayer for the three friends.¹⁴

That's not at all what happened. And we need to get the story straight because good chronology is critical to good theology.¹⁵

When he prayed for his friends, he was still covered with sore boils, still destitute, still sitting on ashes in the city dump.

Job learned the lessons taught by Behemoth and Leviathan. He came to full repentance and was re-commissioned by God to bring blessing to the people in his world - even those who had hurt him. He carried out that commission while suffering.

After he prayed, THEN AND ONLY THEN did God restore Job's fortunes.¹⁶

Restoration

Only then did he experience reconciliation with family and friends who had rejected him. (v. 11) Only then did his flocks and herds double in size. (v. 12) Only then did he receive the blessing of ten additional children in his old age. (vv. 13-15)

¹⁴ Eliphaz' retribution theology" would have been validated if this had been the storyline.

¹⁵ Carson writes, "*If some critics are displeased with God's answer to Job out of the storm, even more are incensed by this "happy ending." They think that the story should have ended with Job's repentance. Whether he is restored is irrelevant. And in any case it is untrue to the experience of many, who suffer at length without reprieve. To end the story this way makes the doctrine of retribution basically right after all. The conclusion is therefore anticlimactic at best, contradictory at worst.*" As Reitman explains, though, "*The main flaw in this reasoning is that the dramatic climax is not Job's repentance but rather his intercession.*" I would add that a New Testament understanding of rewards does away with the need to see Job's earthly reward as a stumbling block. Believers in Jesus who learn the lessons of Job and serve God while suffering can look forward to great reward at Christ's Judgment Seat.

¹⁶ Note "*restored*" and "*increased*" in Job 42:10. The words are sandwiched around the phrase "*when he prayed for his friends*" indicating a logical (and chronological) conferring of these two gifts in two stages.

And only then could we have read the book's closing lines, **[16] After this, Job lived 140 years, and saw his sons and his grandsons, four generations. [17] And Job died, an old man and full of days.**

Conclusion:

In these days of COVID-19 induced suffering and uncertainty - along with all the normal sufferings and uncertainties of life! - learn the lessons Job learned.

Submit to your God. (Be like Behemoth and Leviathan)

Repent of doubting God's goodness. (Look at the cross of Jesus)

Be an agent of grace in the lives of others. (Pray for and serve the Eliphazes in your life).