

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(August 25, 2024)

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: The Story of Our Lives...and God

(Growing through Job's story)

When Life Turns to Nightmare

(Background; Job, chapter 1)

Study #1

Introduction: Living a good story...

In 2008, the movie "Australia" hit theatres. It starred Nicole Kidman and Hugh Jackman. It was a good and a long (2 hours, 45 minutes) movie. For me, though, one line stood out.

Near the beginning of the movie, Jackman's character told Kidman's character, *"Most people like to own things. You know, land, luggage, other people. Makes them feel secure. But all that can be taken away. And in the end, the only thing you really own is your story. I'm just tryin' to live a good one."*

The swashbuckling hero of "Australia" saw his life as a story, an epic quest filled with adventure; a life lived to the full - which sounds appealing, right?

We all want to lead a life that is a "good story." That life would revolve around matters that matter, with challenges to be courageous. We would invest our "good story" lives in things that last.

In the Bible, there is the record of a man who led a "VERY good story" life. He lived long ago, faced tremendous challenges, and - most importantly - dealt with God.

This man made his life all about God and His ways. That created not just a "good story" life, but a "best story" life. Over the next three months, you and I are going to get acquainted with this man.

His book - the book of Job - tells us that there is no better story we can know or tell than the story God is making out of our lives.

Before we jump into Job's story, here's some backstory to help us understand his story.

Background to the book of Job

Job, as literature

Most people who know Job's book agree that it is a well-crafted piece of literature. Job winds up on most people's list of Greatest Books Ever - even those who don't believe a word of it.¹

My first acquaintance with Job was in a High School Literature class. Ever since, I've been fascinated with the story of Job.

It is historical narrative and poetry and courtroom drama and wisdom literature² all rolled into one *magnum opus*.

Authorship

We didn't know who wrote the New Testament letter to the Hebrews AND we don't know who wrote the book of Job. (Sorry).³

But the possibilities include Job himself, the young man, Elihu (the speaker in Job chapters 32-37), and King Solomon, among others.⁴

¹ 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."*

² The Wisdom books of the Bible are Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, along with some of the Psalms. Some identify the Song of Solomon as Wisdom literature.

³ Many (mostly more liberal) scholars deny the single authorship of Job. Some believe that the prologue and epilogue (written in prose format) 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 ancient literature.

⁴ This assumes that he received the story after it had been handed down via oral tradition over many centuries. Literacy was widespread in the Ancient Near East,

Date of Events

If it is not clear *who* wrote the book, it is more clear *when* the events described in the book occurred.

There is a lot of evidence in the book that the events recorded took place well *before* the time of Moses, who lived around 1500 BC.⁵ And it was probably closer to 2000 BC when Abraham lived.⁶

OK. So why spend a bunch of Sunday mornings dealing with it?

Why Job?

Well, we're going to look at Job because we need the timely and timeless truths we find here.

My plan is to finish with Job around Thanksgiving. So, the next dozen or so weeks will give us plenty of time to explore a few themes that are crucial for an honest "good story" life with God.

Here is some of what is in store for us:

- In Job's story, we see a man whose life fell apart at the seams. We need to see that because today, lives still fall apart at the seams. Job's story was messy and unpredictable. Same for us. The story told in Job's book assures us that there is no formula guaranteeing that our lives will work the way we want them to. It is important that we understand and embrace the messy ambiguity of life. Job leads us into that understanding.

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 of Job's story took place.

⁵ Some scholars believe that they have found evidence of the Mosaic Law in Job 24:2-11. But this passage only argues against mistreating the poor in any of the ways in which that might have occurred in an ancient, agrarian world.

⁶ This was the view of Bible scholar and archaeologist W.F Albright. This would mean that Job was the first book of the Bible written, which is my own opinion.

- Job's story shows us the value of lament. Lament differs from grumbling and complaining which are toxic. Lament is good. Lament is good grief. We will learn the healthy grace of honest lament as we spend time in Job.
- We'll meet Job's friends. These guys do some of the things that make friends one of God's greatest gifts. They also speak heresy to their suffering friend and keep their distance. At times, we'll listen to them and think, "*With friends like these, who needs enemies?*"
- In a few weeks we'll meet Elihu. This younger man cast a vision for Job - and for us - to be God's agents on earth; to be God's blessings to others.
- We'll watch and learn from Job's personal journey into the land of suffering, a land we're all passing through.
- Finally, we'll see a faithful, loving, wise, just, all-powerful, and wildly unpredictable God who invites us to trust Him even in life's chaotic mess.

The message of the book

You may have heard that the book of Job is about suffering - and it is.

People may have told you that Job's book addresses the question, "*Why do the righteous suffer?*" or "*Why do bad things happen to good people?*" That it is a book about *theodicy*, a case study in the justice of God - it is.

It is all of that and so much more. And we won't get to what IS the heart of the book's message if we don't turn to the text. Let's do that now.

Earthly Bliss for a World Class Man of God (vv. 1-5)

Job and His Sterling Character (v. 1)

[1] There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job; and that man was blameless, upright, fearing God and turning away from evil.

Live, from the land of Uz!

When you hear “Uz” you may think of “Oz” - as in “*The Wizard of...*” But Uz was a real place, a place that many scholars believe was in the ancient land of Edom,⁷ just south and east of the Dead Sea.⁸

To imagine the lay of the land for this book, picture an area close to a desert (1:19), but a land fertile enough to sustain agriculture and livestock (1:3, 14; 42:12).⁹

And then we are introduced to the star of the show: Job.

The star of the show: Job

Surprisingly (certainly for a biblical account), there is no mention of Job’s family heritage. There is no genealogy.¹⁰

But if we don’t know his family tree, we do learn something about his character.

He was, first of all, “*blameless.*” If you threw an accusation of sin at Job, it wouldn’t stick. The New Testament way of saying it is that he was “*above reproach.*”¹¹

And he was “*upright.*” He was a good guy. He had integrity.¹²

⁷ One source ([The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible](#)) places Uz in northern Mesopotamia, near the confluence of the Euphrates and the Tigris Rivers. In addition, Keil and Delitzsch seem to take this view. That is certainly possible. See references to Uz - the person and the land - in Genesis 10:23, 27; 22:21.

⁸ The action of Job’s story takes place outside of the Promised Land of Canaan. There is nothing particularly Jewish about this book.

⁹ So, Zuck (commentary), Archer ([A Survey of Old Testament Introduction](#)).

¹⁰ His name probably derives from a Hebrew word meaning “*to come back*” or “*to repent*” - signifying one who comes back to God. Could also mean “the one who is assailed,” from the Hebrew *ayeb*, to hate.

¹¹ From elsewhere, we know 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).

¹² When speaking of Jews who were upright, the Bible means that they kept the Mosaic Law. Job lived *before* the Mosaic Law was written, so that is not what is in view here.

Plus, he feared God.

The Bible uses a number of names for God. The name by which the Jews knew God - the covenant name for God - was *Yahweh*. It means something like “**I AM.**”

The word for God here in Job 1:1 is not Yahweh. It is *Elohim*.

Elohim was a general name that many peoples of the Ancient Near East used for God. The name speaks to God’s power and authority.

This is Job’s knowledge of God. He worshiped the one true God but was not - at least as far as we know - of the chosen line of Abraham.

Finally, Job turned away from evil. All kinds of evil: Injustice, moral evil, financial impropriety. He ran away from all of it.

Job was a class act. He was a really fine man. And he lived a very blessed life.

Job and His Blessed Life (vv. 2-3)

One big, happy family (v. 2)

[2] Seven sons and three daughters were born to him.

By any standard, that’s a big family!

By the time we meet him, his ten children were adults. Job himself must have been a seasoned citizen, a high mileage man. Many scholars guess that Job was in his 60’s. (☺)

And besides the blessing of his children, the author tells us of his personal wealth.

His possessions and a summary (v. 3)

[3] His possessions were seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred female

donkeys, and very many servants; and that man was the greatest of all the men of the east.

The author probably could have provided dozens of examples of just how great a guy Job was, but he only gives one story.

This one story provides insight into how his character and his walk with God and his family life all meshed into one seamless, holistic holiness.

Job and His Priestly Life Before God (vv. 4-5)

Picture of a happy family (v. 4)

[4] His sons used to go and hold a feast in the house of each one on his day, and they would send word and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them.

Every day of the week was a feast to which all ten of his adult children were invited. Clearly, Job had a big, loving, tight family.

Job, the father, functioned as God's priest to his family.

Just in case... (v. 5)

[5] When the days of feasting had completed their cycle, Job would send word to them and consecrate them, getting up early in the morning and offering burnt offerings according to the number of them all;¹³ for Job said, "Perhaps my sons have sinned and cursed God in their hearts." Job did so continually.¹⁴

Every seventh day, after the feasting of that day (which would also be the first day of a new cycle), Job would wake up early, bring his

kids together, and offer animals to atone for any sins they might have committed.¹⁵

In this act we see both his love for his children AND his reverence for God. By singling out this story, the author of Job wants us to know that this is the high point of his life before God.

That's Job. He's got a great life and is living a really good story.

Then, the author shifts our attention from earth to heaven. He pulls back the curtain so that we get to see events happening in the realm of God and His angels.

Heavenly Conflict (vv. 6-12)

Setting the Scene for The Wager (v. 6)

[6] Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them.

We don't know for what reason the "***sons of God***" (angels) came to present themselves before God (here, Yahweh).

But there they are. And included in this assembly is one called "*the adversary*" or [the] Satan.¹⁶

This is the devil. He's opposed to God and His ways and His kingdom. He is God's adversary, and he is adversary to God's people.

When [the] Satan showed up at this heavenly assembly, the Lord notices and asked a question.

Satan, a Very Active Adversary (v. 7)

¹³ Note again that there is nothing particularly Jewish about these sacrifices. People in cultures all around the world have offered sacrifice to God to atone for sin.

¹⁴ As several commentators have noted, Job's role here indicates a patriarchal family-clan type of organization reminiscent of Abraham's time, confirming the early second millennium time frame (roughly 2,000 BC) for this story.

¹⁵ Again, not YHWH, but God (Elohim).

¹⁶ Some refer to this being as "The Satan."

[7] The LORD said to Satan, “From where do you come?” Satan answered the LORD and said, “From roaming about on the earth and walking around on it.”

God was no more looking for information from Satan than He was when He asked Adam and Eve, “**Where are you?**” after they sinned in the Garden of Eden.

God knew what Satan had been doing and where he had been. The question was to prompt Satan to admit to what he had been up to.

Satan wasn’t very forthcoming. His answer was evasive, like a criminal answering a police officer, “*Oh, I’ve just been hanging around.*”

In our New Testaments we read that Satan “**prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour**” (1 Peter 5:8). He’s been doing that for thousands of years, back to Job’s days and well before Job, too.

God knew that Satan was looking for people to “**devour,**” to accuse and to tempt. That’s why God drew Satan’s attention to Job.

God Boasts of His Servant, Job (v. 8)

[8a] The LORD said to Satan, “Have you considered My servant Job?”

God “baits” Satan. “*Here’s one guy you haven’t gotten to!*”

[8b]...“For there is no one like him on the earth...”

And then God said the same thing that the author of Job had written earlier. He is **[8b]...“a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil.”**

Job is God’s trophy of grace. He hasn’t fallen for Satan’s tempting schemes. Satan has failed in his efforts to corrupt Job.

Satan was not impressed.

Satan, a Very Cynical Adversary (vv. 9-11)

“Job loves You? Sure he does...” (vv. 9-10)

[9] Then Satan answered the LORD, “Does Job fear God for nothing? [10] “Have You not made a fence about him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land.

Satan’s claim is that Job has simply discovered a “life hack.” Practice a little bit of righteousness, get a little bit of blessing. Practice a lot of righteousness, get a lot of blessings.

So of course he leads an unusually righteous life. Who wouldn’t? It’s the way to get ahead.¹⁷

According to Satan, Job’s morality and worship has nothing to do with a reverent response to the majesty of the Creator. And to prove his point Satan proposes a bet.

“Let’s see what happens when his life gets wrecked.” (v. 11)

[11] “But reach out with Your hand now and touch all that he has; he will certainly curse You to Your face.”

He dared God to “**touch all that [Job] has.**”

Satan is confident that if Job suffers loss, he will cease to be God’s model citizen. “*Take away his stuff and he’ll turn away from You.*”

God takes that bet.

God Permits Satan’s Limited Action Against Job (v. 12)

[12] Then the LORD said to Satan, “Behold, all that he has is in your power, only do not reach out and put your hand on him.” So Satan departed from the presence of the LORD.

Here is the wager:

¹⁷ He admits that Job fears God but says that it’s only because God has protected him from evil and blessed him with every good thing.

- God is betting that Job will stand firm out of genuine reverence. This is what God is always looking for. He's looking for someone who will trust, worship, love, obey, and serve Him - come what may.
- Satan says that Job has been God's good little soldier just so that he will get what he wants. Take away his toys and he'll fall.

This exchange between God and Satan sets the stage for the great drama of the book.

So far, Job has been a great representative of God to his world. He has been a man of character and a priest to those he loves - Will he continue to be so when the blessings of God are stripped away, when he loses everything?

We'll do well to remember in what follows that Satan dared God to **"touch"** Job with loss. Instead, God gave permission to Satan to **"touch"** Job. (The only limit God placed was the Satan could not **"touch"** Job - only things dear to him.)

And remember, too, that Job knew nothing of this wager between God and Satan. Job is just living his "good story" life.

And with that, Satan left to "touch" everything in the world Job valued.

The Wager: Round One (vv. 13-22)

Calamities Strike! (vv. 13-19)

Calamity #1 (vv. 13-15)

[13] Now on the day when his sons and his daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother's house, [14] a messenger came to Job and said, "The oxen were plowing and the female donkeys feeding beside them, [15] and the Sabeans attacked and took them. They also killed the servants with the edge of the sword, and I alone have escaped to tell you."

The Sabeans were a warlike, desert tribe who lived in Job's day. Sabean attacks may have been common, but this one was devastating.

Job's five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred female donkeys were all taken. Many of his servants were killed.

Calamity #2 (v. 16)

[16] While he was still speaking, another also came and said, "The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants and consumed them, and I alone have escaped to tell you."

If Job would have expected an attack from the Sabean tribes, he would not have expected fire to fall from heaven that would consume seven thousand sheep - along with the servants.

Sure, this could have been a terrible natural disaster (a lightning strike?), but when the messenger identified it as **"the fire of God from heaven"** Job would certainly have thought of God's work.

Calamity #3 (v. 17)

[17] While he was still speaking, another came and said, "The Chaldeans formed three units and made a raid on the camels and took them, and killed the servants with the edge of the sword, and I alone have escaped to tell you."

Like the earlier attack of the Sabeans, this attack from the Chaldeans might have been expected.¹⁸ But it was a great loss to have all three thousand of his camels stolen and the servants who watched the camels killed.

Finally, the fourth and most devastating message came right on the heels of the third. This one, like the second calamity (fire from heaven), would not have been expected.

Calamity #4 (vv. 18-19)

¹⁸ They were predecessors to the Babylonians who at this time in their history were nomadic.

[18] While he was still speaking, another also came and said, "Your sons and your daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother's house, [19] and behold, a great wind came from across the wilderness and struck the four corners of the house, and it fell on the young people and they died, and I alone have escaped to tell you."

Yes, tornadoes happen. Great gusts of damaging wind are natural occurrences.

But the piling on of these four calamities - Sabeans and Chaldeans, fire and wind - one after the other in rapid succession on one horrible day leaves Job with only one conclusion as to their source.

This wasn't terrible luck. This was God.

Job's God-Honoring Response (vv. 20-21)

[20] Then Job got up, tore his robe and shaved his head; then 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."

Job's sufferings were financial, emotional, physical, and intensely personal. He has lost all of his material wealth and his precious children.

His shaved head and his torn robes are external signs of his grief. As he grieved, he worshiped.

For his whole life he accepted everything that he had as gifts from God. With all of that gone, he accepted his loss as also from God.

Now, of course, technically, Job was wrong. We know that it was not God who "took away." It was Satan.

A quick internet search will surface people who shake their heads at poor old Job who didn't understand what was really going on.

You'll even find those who mock those who sing, as we just did, "Blessed Be Your Name" with the chorus, "He gives and takes away."

What a foolish thing for Job to say and what a foolish song for us to sing. To which I say, "Really?"

His response was correct in that God allowed Satan to do what he did AND it was exactly the response God was looking for.

Even in pain Job blessed God. ***[22] Through all this Job did not sin nor did he blame God.***

Conclusion: The provocative beginning of Job's story...

The fight isn't over. But Satan has lost the first round of the wager. God won the victory in Round One through His champion, Job.

And I want to leave you with three thoughts this morning to ponder as we wrap up.

Job's story forces us to admit that life is messy.

The greatest man of his time, a man who was blameless and upright, who feared God and turned away from evil, suffered the loss of everything dear to him. His life fell apart at the seams.

And you and I want to know how to make life work. We would have thought that Job nailed it with an impeccably righteous life. Not so. His life turned to nightmare...and he did nothing wrong.

Then we look around us - or we look in the mirror - and admit that Job's experience is not unique.

People still suffer through no fault of their own. Nobody's perfect, but really bad things happen to people who didn't deserve it.

There are no reliable formulas guaranteeing that life will turn out the way we hope. Life is messy. Job's "good story" life forces us to admit to that messiness.

Job's story invites us to reflect on God and His ways.

God is not capricious. He doesn't act arbitrarily. We believe that God is just and wise. But unavoidable questions about God and His ways rise from this story.

The evidence from what we have seen today brings a sobering challenge to our concept of God. In an honest moment we may ask questions, like:

- What kind of a God would barter away His blessings from a righteous man in a wager with Satan?
- What is God trying to prove?
- Can such a God be trusted? Is such a God good?

Go ahead and ask the questions. Don't shy away from them. Bring your honest questions to God. He can handle them.

Job's story challenges us to respond to God as Job did.

Watch Job. He leads the way with honest grief. Clothing ripped and a buzz haircut. He follows that up with heartfelt worship and he blessed the Lord.

In all of this he never blamed God. He never pretended that God wasn't involved in his losses (***"The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away"***), but He didn't accuse God of doing anything wrong.

Scripture's verdict is that Job's response was ***"sinless."***

Job's story challenges us to respond to trials the way Job did.

Never pretend or deny the pain. Accept loss with honest grief. Never stop worshiping and blessing God.