

When Tragedy Occurs

Devotional Reading: Psalm 22:1-11

Background Scripture: Job 1-3

Printed Text: Job 1:14-15, 18-19, 22; 3:1-3, 11 **Time:** about 2000 B.C. **Place:** Land of Uz

Job 1:14-15

¹⁴ *a messenger came to Job and said, “The oxen were plowing and the donkeys were grazing nearby, ¹⁵ 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!”*

¹⁸ *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, ¹⁹ 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!”*

²² *In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.*

Job 3:1-3, 11

After this, Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. ² He said: ³ “May the day of my birth perish, and the night that said, ‘A boy is conceived!’

¹¹ *“Why did I not perish at birth, and die as I came from the womb?*

Note: Be sure to read the background scripture - Job 1-3

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each student will be able to:

- Recite the fundamental facts about the person and book of Job.
- Discuss the nature of grief and right ways to respond to it.
- Make a plan to worship God when personal grief comes.

INTRODUCTION

What is human tragedy? Does it only occur when one finds himself undeservedly on the receiving end of it, or is it possible to bring tragedy upon oneself? According to the Bible, Job did nothing to deserve the predicament we find him in in today's lesson (see Job 1:8, and 2:3). Nonetheless, we are reminded not of the fact that Job suffered great loss, but of how he responded to the same.

In the midst of unexpected calamity (lay-offs, bankruptcy, loss of property, loss of the activity of one's bodily functions, divorce, eviction, rape, the ravages of a drug addicted spouse or other family member, etc.) Christians should respond differently than those who don't have a relationship with Jesus Christ would respond. Why? Because just as God "hedged in" Job-protecting him from death at the hand of Satan, God also hedges in His children and protects us from certain disaster. While it is true that bad things happen to proverbial "good" people-because none is righteous, we must remember that God gives and He takes away, and we must continually bless Him in all circumstances because of His glory. It's not about us!

LESSON BACKGROUND

The book of Job is the subject of countless opinions. Scholars disagree about the author; some say Job himself wrote it. Others try to make a case for Moses or even Elihu, a friend of Job who appears near the end of the book. Since no author is given, we cannot know for sure. Its value comes from the fact that the book is inspired by God; the value is not dependent on knowing the identity of the human author.

Scholars also differ as to the date. Their estimate ranges from Job's being one of the earliest Old Testament books to one of the last. Even the language is hard to translate. That would be an indication of its being a very old book. A good guess is that Job himself lived sometime in the age of the patriarchs, between 2000 and 1500 B.C. It is possible that the time period of Job himself and the time of the writing of the book are not the same.

Scholars also offer different opinions about the man Job. Was he an Israelite or not? We don't know. We are certain, however, that Job was not a fictitious character (see Ezekiel 14:14, 20; James 5:11). He is described as being from Uz (Job 1:1). This is in the territory of the Edomites, south of Palestine (Lamentations 4:21). The book of Job depicts Job as a righteous man; he feared God. He turned away from evil. He was good to his neighbors. He worshipped God and offered sacrifices. God himself declared Job to be "a blameless and upright man, one that fears God and shuns evil" (Job 1:8). That will be important to remember as we explore this book.

The book of Job is more than just the story of a man with patience-as we have forever heard said, "She has the patience of Job." The book of Job forces us to wrestle with our understanding of-and our response to-suffering. After chapter one introduces us to Job, we move quickly to an assembly in Heaven. God is there, and standing in His presence are the "sons of God" (Job 1:6). These are probably angels (see also Job 38:7), although they are definitely not "sons of God" in the same sense as Jesus (see Hebrews 1:5).

Among the angels is one called Satan, which means "adversary" or "accuser." (It is more of a title than a name.) God brags about Job, but Satan accuses God of taking it easy on that man. Satan tells God that Job's faithfulness is understandable considering all the material blessings God has given him. Satan then proclaims that Job will curse God to His face if God makes Job's life difficult (Job 1:11). Consequently, the Lord grants Satan permission to oppress Job. "*Behold, all that he has is in your power, only do not lay a hand on his person*" (Job 1:12 NKJV).

JOB'S CALAMITY (Job 1:14-15, 18-19, 22)

Job lived in the land of Uz, which was a territory to the east of Canaan. Scholars do not know for certain what time period Job lived in, but it seems likely that he lived at about the time of the patriarchs of Israel; that is, he lived during the time of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

1. In what time period is it believed that Job lived?

These verses show where Job's children were gathered together for one of their times of feasting. However, the first round of disaster did not concern Job's sons and daughters, but rather his possessions. In the ancient world wealth was generally measured by land, domesticated animals, and the number of servants one possessed. "The oxen were plowing and the donkeys feeding beside them, when the Sabeans raided them and took them away-indeed they have killed the servants with the edge of the sword" is what one of Job's surviving servant/messengers told him in verses 14 and 15.

2. What happened in the first round of disaster to strike Job? (Job 1:13-15)

The Sabeans were a gang of raiders who stole Job's animals and killed his servants. These people may have been from the land of Sheba in southwest Arabia-present day Yemen. They engaged in caravan

trading, which would account for their being so far from home. They obviously did not confine themselves to peaceful commerce! (It is possible that there were other Sabeans already headquartered in northern Arabia, closer to where Job lived. These Sabeans would then have been more like local raiders.)

3. Who were the perpetrators of the first attack on Job? (Job 1:15)

Job's attacks almost seem invented because in a sense they really were. Satan brought Job's losses in a rapid-fire and uniform way that was sure to put Job's faith to the sternest test. The author of this historical account has also arranged the material so that we can better understand the overwhelming nature of these calamities. There could be no question of mere coincidence. Job would be compelled to consider what in the world was going on. There will be times in our lives when we will think similarly to Job and wonder, "Lord, why are these things being allowed to happen to me? Are you testing my faith? Is there a lesson to be learned at the end of all this? Can I expect a great blessing as a result?"

4. Why is it that the attacks on Job almost seem invented?

John Hartley, author of *The Book of Job* (Eerdmans), observes that each of the four calamitous events affecting Job came from one of the four points of the compass. The Chaldeans that "formed three bands (and) raided the camels and took them away..., and killed the servants" (v. 17) came from the north. The Sabeans who "raided" Job's "oxen (that) were plowing and the donkeys feeding beside them" (v. 14) came from the south. The wind that killed Job's sons and daughters "came from across the wilderness" (v. 19) or from the east. Finally, the lightning that formed in a Mediterranean storm and that was called "fire of God (falling) from heaven (burning) up the sheep and the servants (consuming) them" (v. 16) came from the west. Job was attacked from the north, south, east, and west. Hartley adds that "the number four also symbolizes full measure, totality."

5. How is it that the attacks on Job can be said to have come from all directions? (Job 1:18-19)

Already in shock over the loss of his property, Job was in a weakened state when he received the worst news a parent can receive—the death of his seven sons and three daughters. We might well wonder how we would react in the face of this sorrow. For his part, Job maintained a remarkably good attitude at this point. He acknowledged that everything he possessed had come from God, who had the right to do with His gifts as He saw fit. Job maintained a spirit of worship and praise. He refused to accuse God of acting sinfully in the things that had happened to him. To have done so would have been foolish, for it would have involved a failure to remember God's character and man's place in the world.

6. How did Job demonstrate his righteousness in his response to his children's deaths? (Job 1:22)

There are a number of factors at work. Not ready to give up, Satan had received God's permission for a second attack on Job, this time affecting his physical health (2:4-5). Job was afflicted with painful boils all over his body. As anyone who has experienced intense and prolonged pain will know, there are few sterner tests of spiritual steadfastness.

There were other factors at work in Job's life. His wife was not an encouragement. Beset by grief herself, she told Job, in effect, to just give up and forget about God (2:9). Job rejected this idea, but it certainly did not make maintaining a right spirit any easier.

The simple passage of time was another force at work with Job. Sometimes we can find great strength to face troubles when they first appear; but with time, grief and pain have a way of wearing down our spiritual defenses. For at least a week, and probably much longer, Job had been dealing with his

seemingly ruined life. Apparently he had reached a breaking point. He began to pour out his despair to the friends who had gathered around him.

7. What accounts for Job's change of attitude in chapter three? (Job 3:1-3)

JOB'S SADNESS (Job 3:1-3, 11)

We must acknowledge that the attitude Job's words express is not one that should habitually mark God's children. Some Bible commentators have been quite strident in their criticisms of Job. Matthew Henry declared that "unless (Job's words) had been better, it would... have been well if he had kept them to himself" (Commentary on the Whole Bible, Hendrickson). Henry continued, "To curse the day of our own birth because... we entered upon the calamitous scene of life is to quarrel with the God of nature, to despise the dignity of our being, and to indulge a passion which our own calm and sober thoughts will make us ashamed of."

We must remember, however, the extreme duress that Job was experiencing. He is certainly not the only believer who has had dark thoughts. For example, the Prophet Jeremiah spoke similar words (see Jeremiah 20:14-18).

8. What can we learn from the way Job spoke in chapter 3?

When evaluating Job's words, we must also bear in mind what he did not do. Although he cursed the day of his birth, he did not curse God, as his wife would have had him do. And despite his weariness of life, he showed no inclination to commit suicide. He was in an angry mood, but we can still see evidence of godliness. God is not surprised or shocked when we express our anger at life. He is big enough to handle it. He knows all about our weaknesses (see Psalm 103:14). He wants us to maintain a relationship with Him by being honest with Him about how we feel.

9. What can we learn from what Job did not do in response to his circumstances?

Job's example should encourage us to be honest with God. "Job rightly grieves his bereavement; he is authentically depressed by his illness. He is human. The untrammelled serenity which some prescribe as the goal of 'victorious living' is a negation of whole areas of our experience" (in Zuck, ed., *Sitting with Job*, Baker). The road to glorifying and loving God can be a rocky one.

Job's sufferings led him to think that life did not have any joy. A key point, though, is that he did not give up trying to find the truth. God wants us to turn to Him in times of despair. As would happen with Job, our dark times can lead us to a closer relationship with God.

10. What should Job's example encourage us to be?

CONCLUSION

Job brings us face-to-face with one of Christianity's greatest challenges: If God is good, then why does He allow the innocent to suffer? It was not God who brought the problems into Job's life-but neither did God interfere with Satan as he oppressed Job.

Sometimes suffering comes about as a direct consequence of the personal choices that people make (example: contracting a sexually transmitted infection through immoral behavior). Sometimes God Himself inflicts suffering because of sin (example: Ezekiel 32:1-15). But at other times, as with Job, the suffering is unexplainable from an earthly point of view. God may have a bigger plan in mind that we can't see. (In Job's case we can see it but he can't.) In such instances we continue to trust God above all else (Job 13:15; 19:25). Job thought the solution to his problem was more knowledge (see Job 13:23; 23:5). But that was not God's viewpoint.

We should notice in passing that Satan is limited. He cannot do anything that God will not allow him to do. In the end even the devil must honor God's sovereignty. Satan has tried to put God down through Job. But, ultimately it is Satan who is proven wrong.

Although Job eventually passes his tests, this lesson does not end on a high note. We will have to wait for the next two lessons (April 9 and 16) to have a more satisfactory conclusion. Still, our lesson displays the great faith of Job. Even in despair he does not make foolish statements nor does he take foolish actions.

Many do not follow Job's example, but some do. Arthur John Gossip was the preacher at Beechgrove church in Aberdeen, Scotland. In 1927 he lost his wife quite suddenly. His congregation was curious as to what he would say on his first day back in the pulpit. His sermon title was "When Life Tumbles In-What Then?" That sermon has become a classic. It appears in many sermons collections and frequently is studied in seminaries. While that sermon displays an extraordinary use of language and organization, it is a classic because it deals with fresh grief.

Arthur John Gossip communicated that when all is lost, we must turn to God. Gossip said, "I do not understand this life of ours. But still less can I comprehend how people in trouble and loss and bereavement can fling away peevishly from the Christian faith. In God's name, fling to what? Have we not lost enough without losing that too?"

By drawing the curtain aside and showing us what happens in heaven, the book of Job helps us deal with personal problems on this earth. By resisting the quick and ungodly solutions offered by Satan and holding patiently to God's promises, we too can be victorious over life's tragedies.

When we face personal tragedies, we are pulled in opposite directions. We are tempted to be pulled downward and be persuaded by Satan to despair. But, Scripture teaches us to look upward and trust God in spite of our trying circumstances.

PRACTICAL POINTS

Earthly possessions are subject to being torn from us by earthly thieves; only eternal riches are eternally secure (Job 1:14-15).

Those we love in this life may be parted from us without warning; but Jesus is forever our constant Friend and Brother (vs. 18-19).

When tragedy strikes, a righteous man and woman of faith will silently humble himself/herself before God (vs. 22).

When a deep tragedy weighs on his mind, even a righteous person may be driven to despair (3:1-2).

Even the faithful can express distress and bitterness (vs. 3).

The troubles of life can cause us to question God, but in the end they should strengthen our faith (vs. 11)

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

The ultimate loss is to reject God.

PRAYER

Dear Lord, like Your servant Job, we often do not understand why we are being allowed to suffer. Like Job we struggle with many whys in life. When tragedy does come, may it draw us closer to You so that we may overcome it. In the name of Jesus-who also suffered, albeit unjustly-amen.