

"Trust the past to the mercy of God, the present to His love, and the future to His providence."

St. Augustine

The Drama Begins

Lord Byron was on target when he wrote: "Truth is always strange; stranger than fiction."

The Book of Job is not religious fiction. Job was a real person, not an imaginary character; both Ezekiel (14:14, 20) and James (5:11) attest to that. Because he was a real man who had real experiences, he can tell us what we need to know about life and its problems in this real world.

These first three chapters introduce us to the man Job and reveal four important facts about him.

1. Job's prosperity (Job 1:1-5)

The land of Uz was probably in or near Edom (Lam. 4:21). Eliphaz, one of Job's friends, came from Teman, which is associated with the Edomites (Job 2:11; Gen. 36:11).

His character (Job 1:1). Job was "perfect and upright" (Job 1:1). He was not sinless, for nobody can claim that distinction; but he was complete and mature in character and "straight" in conduct. The word translated "perfect" is related to "integrity," another important word in Job (2:3, 9; 27:5; 31:6). People with integrity are whole persons, without hypocrisy or duplicity. In the face of his friends' accusations and

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God's silence, Job maintained his integrity; and the Lord ultimately vindicated him.

The foundation for Job's character was the fact that he "feared God and shunned evil." "Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding" (28:28). To fear the Lord means to respect who He is, what He says, and what He does. It is not the cringing fear of a slave before a master but the loving reverence of a child before a father, a respect that leads to obedience. "The remarkable thing about fearing God," said Oswald Chambers, "is that when you fear God you fear nothing else, whereas if you do not fear God you fear everything else."

His family (Job 1:2). Job was prosperous in his family. The events in Job took place during the Patriarchal Age when a large family was seen as a blessing from God (Gen. 12:2; 13:16; 30:1). The children must have enjoyed each other's company since they met frequently to celebrate their birthdays. This speaks well of the way Job and his wife raised them. The fact that their father offered special sacrifices after each birthday feast does not prove their celebration was wicked. It only shows that Job was a pious man and wanted to be sure his family was right with God.

His material possessions (Job 1:3). In those days, wealth was measured primarily in terms of land, animals, and servants; and Job had all three in abundance. But being rich did not turn him away from God. He acknowledged that the Lord gave this wealth to him (Job 1:21), and he used his wealth generously for the good of others (4:1-4; 29:12-17; 31:16-32). Job would have had no problem obeying what Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 6:6-19.

His friends (Job 2:11). While it is true that his three friends hurt Job deeply and wronged him greatly, they were still his friends. When they heard about Job's calamities, they traveled a long distance to visit him; and they sat in silence as

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they sympathized with him. Their mistake was in thinking they had to explain Job's situation and tell him how to change it.

"My best friend," said Henry Ford, "is the one who brings out the best in me"; but Job's friends brought out the worst in him. However, in the end Job and his friends were reconciled (42:7-10); and I like to think that their relationship was deeper than before. To have true friends is to be wealthy indeed.

2. Job's adversity (Job 1:6-19)

In one day, Job was stripped of his wealth. One after another, four frightened messengers reported that 500 yoke of oxen, 500 donkeys, and 3,000 camels were stolen in enemy raids; 7,000 sheep were struck by lightning and killed; and all 10 of his children were killed by a windstorm. King Solomon was right: "Moreover, no man knows when his hour will come: As fish are caught in a cruel net, or birds are taken in a snare, so men are trapped by evil times that fall unexpectedly upon them" (Ecc. 9:12, NIV).

Job knew *what* had happened, but he did not know *why* it had happened; and that is the crux of the matter. Because the author allows us to visit the throne room of heaven and hear God and Satan speak, we know who caused the destruction and why he was allowed to cause it. But if we did not have this insight, we would probably take the same approach as Job's friends and blame Job for the tragedy.

Several important truths emerge from this scene, not the least of which is that *God is sovereign in all things*. He is on the throne of heaven, the angels do His will and report to Him, and even Satan can do nothing to God's people without God's permission. "The Almighty" is one of the key names for God in Job; it is used thirty-one times. From the outset, the writer reminds us that, no matter what happens in this

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world and in our lives, God is on the throne and has everything under control.

A second truth—and it may surprise you—is that *Satan has access to God's throne in heaven*. Thanks to John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, many people have the mistaken idea that Satan is ruling this world from hell ("Better to reign in hell, than serve in heav'n"). But Satan will not be cast into the lake of fire until before the final judgment (Rev. 20:10ff). Today, he is free to go about *on the earth* (Job 1:7; 1 Peter 5:8) and can even go into God's presence in heaven.

This third truth is most important: *God found no fault with Job, but Satan did*. God's statement in Job 1:8 echoes the description of Job in verse 1, but Satan questioned it. The word "Satan" means "adversary, one who opposes the law." This is a courtroom scene, and God and Satan each deliver different verdicts about Job. As you study this book, keep in mind that God said "Not guilty!" (1:8; 2:3; 42:7) There was nothing in Job's life that compelled God to cause him to suffer. But Satan said "Guilty!" because he is the accuser of God's people and finds nothing good in them (Zech. 3; Rev. 12:10).

Satan's accusation against Job was really an attack on God. We might paraphrase it like this: "The only reason Job fears You is because You pay him to do it. You two have made a contract: You protect him and prosper him as long as he obeys You and worships You. You are not a God worthy of worship! You have to pay people to honor You."

Job's three friends said Job was suffering because he had sinned, and that was not true. Elihu said that God was chastening Job to make him a better man, and that was partly true. But the fundamental reason for Job's suffering was *to silence the blasphemous accusations of Satan and prove that a man would honor God even though he had lost everything*. It was a battle "in the heavenlies" (Eph. 6:12), but Job did not

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know it. Job's life was a battlefield where the forces of God and Satan were engaged in a spiritual struggle to decide the question, "Is Jehovah God worthy of man's worship?"

Now we can better understand why Job was so unyielding as he resisted the advice of his friends. They wanted him to repent of his sins so that God would remove the suffering and make him prosperous again. Job was not going to "invent" sin in his life just so he could repent and "earn" the blessing of God. *To do that would be to play right into the hands of the accuser!* Instead, Job held fast to his integrity and blessed God even though he did not understand what God was doing. What a defeat for the prince of darkness!

A fourth truth emerges: *Satan can touch God's people only with God's permission, and God uses it for their good and His glory.* Phillips Brooks said, "The purpose of life is the building of character through truth." God is at work in our lives to make us more like Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:29), and He can use even the attacks of the devil to perfect us. When you are in the path of obedience and you find yourself in a severe trial, remind yourself that nothing can come to your life that is outside His will.

Some of the so-called tragedies in the lives of God's people have really been weapons of God to "still the enemy and the avenger" (Ps. 8:2). The angels watch the church and learn from God's dealings with His people (1 Cor. 4:9; Eph. 3:10). We may not know until we get to heaven why God allowed certain things to happen. Meanwhile, we walk by faith and say with Job, "Blessed be the name of the Lord."

3. Job's fidelity (Job 1:20-22)

The hosts of heaven and of hell watched to see how Job would respond to the loss of his wealth and his children. He expressed his grief in a manner normal for that day, for God expects us to be human (1 Thes. 4:13). After all, even Jesus

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wept (John 11:35). But then Job worshiped God and uttered a profound statement of faith (Job 1:21).

First, he *looked back* to his birth: "Naked came I out of my mother's womb." Everything Job owned was given to him by God, and the same God who gave it had the right to take it away. Job simply acknowledged that he was a steward.

Then Job *looked ahead* to his death: "and naked shall I return." He would not return to his mother's womb, because that would be impossible. He would go to "Mother Earth," be buried, and turn to dust. (The connection between "birth" and "Mother Earth" is seen also in Ps. 139:13-15.) Nothing that he acquired between his birth and death would go with him into the next world. Paul wrote, "For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out" (1 Tim. 6:7).

Finally, Job *looked up* and uttered a magnificent statement of faith: "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21). Instead of cursing God, as Satan said Job would do, Job blessed the Lord! Anybody can say, "The Lord gave" or "The Lord hath taken away"; but it takes real faith to say in the midst of sorrow and suffering, "Blessed be the name of the Lord."

"In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God with folly" (v. 22).

4. Job's misery (Job 2:1-3:26)

In this section, you hear four different voices.

The voice of the accuser (Job 2:1-8). Satan does not give up easily, for he returned to God's throne to accuse Job again. As in the first meeting (1:8), it is God who brings up the subject of His servant Job; and Satan accepts the challenge. We get the impression that God is confident His servant will not fail the test.

"Every man has his price," said Satan. "Job can raise an-

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other family and start another business because he still has health and strength. Let me touch his body and take away his health, and You will soon hear him curse You to Your face."

With God's permission (1 Cor. 10:13), Satan afflicted Job with a disease we cannot identify. Whatever it was, the symptoms were terrible: severe itching (Job 2:8), insomnia (v. 4), running sores and scabs (v. 5), nightmares (vv. 13-14), bad breath (19:17), weight loss (v. 20), chills and fever (21:6), diarrhea (30:27), and blackened skin (v. 30). When his three friends first saw Job, they did not recognize him! (2:12)

Not all physical affliction comes directly from the evil one, though Satan's demons can cause (among other things) blindness (Matt. 12:22), dumbness (9:32-33), physical deformities (Luke 13:11-17), incessant pain (2 Cor. 12:7), and insanity (Matt. 8:28-34). Sometimes physical affliction is the natural result of carelessness on our part, and we have nobody to blame but ourselves. But even then, Satan knows how to use our folly to further his cause.

So abhorrent was Job's appearance that he fled society (Job 19:13-20) and went outside the city and sat on the ash heap. There the city garbage was deposited and burned, and there the city's rejects lived, begging alms from whoever passed by. At the ash heap, dogs fought over something to eat, and the city's dung was brought and burned. The city's leading citizen was now living in abject poverty and shame.

The voice of the quitter (Job 2:9-10). If ever a believer in Old Testament days shared in the fellowship of Christ's sufferings, it was Job. All that he humanly had left was his wife and his three friends, and even they turned against him. No wonder Job felt that God had deserted him!

"Curse God and die!" was exactly what Satan wanted Job to do, and Job's wife put the temptation before her husband. Yes, Satan can work through people who are dear to us (Matt. 16:22-23; Acts 21:10-14); and the temptation is stron-

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ger because we love them so much. Adam listened to Eve (Gen. 3:6, 12), and Abraham listened to Sarah (Gen. 16); but Job did not listen to the advice of his wife.

She was wrong, of course; but in all fairness, we must consider her situation. She had lost ten children in one day, and that would be enough to devastate any mother. The family wealth was gone, and she was no longer the "leading lady" in the land. Her husband, once the greatest man in the East (Job 1:3), was now sitting at the city garbage dump, suffering from a terrible disease. What did she have left? Rather than watch her husband waste away in pain and shame, she would prefer that God strike him dead and get it over with immediately. Perhaps if Job cursed God, God would do it.

In times of severe testing, our first question must not be, "*How* can I get out of this?" but "*What* can I get out of this?" Job's wife thought she had the problem solved; but if Job had followed her counsel, it would have only made things worse. Faith is living without scheming. It is obeying God in spite of feelings, circumstances, or consequences, knowing that He is working out His perfect plan in His way and in His time.

The two things Job would not give up were his faith in God and his integrity, and that's what his wife wanted him to do. Even if God did permit evil to come into his life, Job would not rebel against God by taking matters into his own hands. Job had never read *The Letters of Samuel Rutherford*, but he was following the counsel of that godly Scottish pastor who suffered greatly: "It is faith's work to claim and challenge loving-kindness out of all the roughest strokes of God." Job was going to trust God—and even argue with God!—and not waste his sufferings or his opportunity to receive what God had for him.

When life is difficult, it's easy to give up; but giving up is the worst thing we can do. A professor of history said, "If

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Columbus had turned back, nobody would have blamed him — but nobody would have remembered him either." If you want to be memorable, sometimes you have to be miserable.

In the end, Job's wife was reconciled to her husband and to the Lord, and God gave her another family (42:13). We don't know how much she learned from her sufferings; but we can assume it was a growing experience for her.

The voice of the mourners (Job 2:11-13). The term "Job's comforters" is a familiar phrase for describing people whose help only makes you feel worse. But these three men had some admirable qualities in spite of the way they persecuted Job.

For one thing, they cared enough for Job to travel a long distance to visit him. And when they commiserated with him, they didn't sit in a comfortable home or hospital room: they sat with him on the ash heap, surrounded by refuse. Because their grief was so great, they couldn't speak for seven days. (Of course, they made up for their silence afterward.) In fact, their expression of grief was like mourning for the death of a great person (Gen. 50:10).

The best way to help people who are hurting is just to be with them, saying little or nothing, and letting them know you care. Don't try to explain everything; explanations never heal a broken heart. If his friends had listened to him, accepted his feelings, and not argued with him, they would have helped him greatly; but they chose to be prosecuting attorneys instead of witnesses. In the end, the Lord rebuked them; and they had to ask Job's forgiveness (Job 42:7-10).

The voice of the sufferer (Job 3:1-26). After seven days of silent suffering, Job spoke, not to curse God but to curse the day of his birth. "Why was I ever born?" has been sobbed by more than one hurting child of God, including the Prophet Jeremiah (Jer. 20:14-18). This is not quite the same as saying, "I wish I were dead"; though Job did express that desire

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more than once (Job 6:9; 7:15-16; 14:13). *At no time did Job speak of ending his own life.* Job's "birthday lament" is not a defense of suicide or so-called "mercy killing." It is the declaration of a man whose suffering was so intense that he wished he had never been born.

When you are hurting, you may say and do a lot of things that you later regret. Job's suffering was so great that he forgot the blessings that he and his family had enjoyed for so many years. Had he never been born, he would never have been the greatest man in the East! But pain makes us forget the joys of the past; instead, we concentrate on the hopelessness of the future. Job's friends heard his words but did not feel the anguish of his heart, and they took the wrong approach to helping him handle his trials. They argued with his words instead of ministering to his feelings.

Job cursed two nights: the night of his conception and the night of his birth (3:1-13). Conception is a blessing that comes from God (Gen. 30:1-2; Ps. 139:13-16); so when we curse a blessing, we are questioning the goodness of God. (Note that Job said a *child* was conceived, not "a mass of protoplasm" or "a thing." He was *a person* from conception.)

The key word here is *darkness*. When a baby is born, it comes out of darkness into the light; but Job wanted to stay in the darkness. In fact, he thought it would have been better if he had been born dead! Then he would have gone to the world of the dead (Sheol) and not had to face all this misery.

He closed his curse with four "why?" questions that nobody but God could answer. It is easy to ask why but difficult to get the right answer. There is nothing wrong with asking why, as long as we don't get the idea that God *owes* us an answer. Even our Lord asked, "Why hast Thou forsaken Me?" (Matt. 27:46) But if the Lord did tell us why things happen as they do, would that ease our pain or heal our broken hearts? Does reading the X ray take away the pain of

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a broken leg? We live on *promises*, not explanations; so we shouldn't spend too much time asking God why.

The last half of the lament is a description of the world of the dead, the place the Jews called Sheol (Job 3:13-26). That's where Job wanted to be! The Old Testament does not give a complete and final revelation of life after death; that had to await the coming of the Savior (2 Tim. 1:10). Job saw Sheol as a shadowy place where the small and great rested together, away from the burdens and sufferings of life on earth. Job would rather be dead and have rest than be alive and bear the misery that had come to him. After all, he was in the dark as far as his future was concerned (Job 3:23), so he might as well be in the darkness of Sheol.

Job shares a secret at the close of his lament (vv. 25-26): before all his troubles started, he had a feeling—and a fear—that something terrible was going to happen. Was it an intuition from the Lord? Sometimes God's people have these intuitions, and it motivates them to seek God's face and pray for His help. Is that what Job did? We don't know, but we do know that he was a broken man whose worst fears had now been realized.

It is unfortunate that the three friends laid hold of Job's lament instead of his statement of faith (1:21; 2:10). After hearing him curse his birthday, they felt it necessary to rebuke him and come to God's defense.

Now the discussion begins. Soon it will become a debate, then a dispute; and the Lord will have to intervene to bring matters to a head.