

## Scripture Reading for October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2021

### **Job 1:1; 2:1-10 (NIV)**

1 In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil.

2 On another day the angels came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came with them to present himself before him. <sup>2</sup> And the LORD said to Satan, "Where have you come from?" Satan answered the LORD, "From roaming throughout the earth, going back and forth on it." <sup>3</sup> Then the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil. And he still maintains his integrity, though you incited me against him to ruin him without any reason." <sup>4</sup> "Skin for skin!" Satan replied. "A man will give all he has for his own life. <sup>5</sup> But now stretch out your hand and strike his flesh and bones, and he will surely curse you to your face." <sup>6</sup> The LORD said to Satan, "Very well, then, he is in your hands; but you must spare his life." <sup>7</sup> So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD and afflicted Job with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head. <sup>8</sup> Then Job took a piece of broken pottery and scraped himself with it as he sat among the ashes. <sup>9</sup> His wife said to him, "Are you still maintaining your integrity? Curse God and die!" <sup>10</sup> He replied, "You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" In all this, Job did not sin in what he said.

### **Psalm 26 (NIV) (*While this is deemed a 'psalm of David,' it seems most appropriate for Job.*)**

<sup>1</sup>Vindicate me, LORD, for I have led a blameless life; I have trusted in the LORD and have not faltered.

<sup>2</sup>Test me, LORD, and try me, examine my heart and my mind;

<sup>3</sup>for I have always been mindful of your unfailing love and have lived in reliance on your faithfulness.

<sup>4</sup>I do not sit with the deceitful, nor do I associate with hypocrites.

<sup>5</sup>I abhor the assembly of evildoers and refuse to sit with the wicked.

<sup>6</sup>I wash my hands in innocence, and go about your altar, LORD,

<sup>7</sup>proclaiming aloud your praise and telling of all your wonderful deeds.

<sup>8</sup>LORD, I love the house where you live, the place where your glory dwells.

<sup>9</sup>Do not take away my soul along with sinners, my life with those who are bloodthirsty,

<sup>10</sup>in whose hands are wicked schemes, whose right hands are full of bribes.

<sup>11</sup>I lead a blameless life; deliver me and be merciful to me.

<sup>12</sup>My feet stand on level ground; in the great congregation I will praise the LORD.

## Sermon: “Why Is This Happening To Me?”

“*Why is this happening to me?*” is one of those questions we often ask in a crisis. It might be that we are facing a sudden job loss or a financial emergency, a medical trauma, a relationship loss—like a divorce or a sudden death, or some other major life event that is outside of our control. Or it may be that the tragedy is *not* happening to us personally, but it feels *very* personal because we deeply love the person who is experiencing the loss.<sup>1</sup> That question “*Why?*” and the fact that it *is* so personal makes the academic problem of suffering acute and real. We want answers. Perhaps we even want to blame someone.

Philosophers and thinkers throughout the ages have wrestled with these questions. Many have written books about suffering; Like you, I have found some to be profound and helpful—though many are not. That’s because for an “explanation” to resonate with us, we must share the same assumptions or worldview. Those who believe in a good God who cares for creation have an *added* problem that atheists *don’t* have, namely, “Where does *God* fit into this suffering?”<sup>2</sup> We may ask this *during* our crisis, sometimes in anger as God seems absent. Or we may ask that question *later* when the initial hurt has subsided, because our faith needs to expand to include these new life-changing events. Personally, I think that’s wise, else we may end up bitter people, and that resentment can sour other relationships and compound the problem. Suffering often causes us to doubt or question our understanding of God. Why doesn’t God *do* more? Why *is* there suffering in the world anyway—and *so* much of it? Do our prayers make *any* difference? Whether we are considering cancer or COVID, the questions remain the same: Where *is* God in this crisis? Our experience of suffering makes us think about three things: the *kind of God* we believe in, the *kind of world* God has created, and the *relationship between the two*—God’s action in the world.

Sooner or later, Christians consider the Old Testament story of Job—and that’s were the lectionary takes us for the next few weeks. Allow me to briefly introduce this complex and confusing book this morning. I take the book’s present form to have been written either during or just after the Babylonian exile.<sup>3</sup> Israel’s experience of suffering made them ask questions of themselves and of their God, and this book has elements of a critique of traditional Jewish thinking. The beginning of Job has a vagueness that is reminiscent of George Lucas’ *Star Wars*, with its classic opening words: “Long ago in a Galaxy far,

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<sup>1</sup> Moreover, to compound our troubles, we can exaggerate them by saying it happened at the “worst possible time.” On reflection, how can we *possibly* know that is the case?! Suffering that arises ‘out of the blue’ is certainly inconvenient—like all unwanted life events (like a flat tire).

<sup>2</sup> This is explored in Reddish, “*Does God Always Get What God Wants?*” (Cascade, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> One reason is that the first two *prose* chapters mention Satan (“the satan” or “the accuser”) who is present freely roaming in the heavenly court. This figure was imported into Jewish thinking with the return from the exile (i.e., 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple literature). The bulk of the book is *poetry* that is written in a (deliberate) archaic style suggesting it is ancient wisdom from patristic times. (There are few historical events to help date the work, giving the impression that it is timeless wisdom saga.) However, in addition to Hebrew linguistic features (e.g., vocabulary, style, etc.), the theological *content* is inconsistent with such ancient times. (Job, then, is not a historical person – nor Jewish; it’s a story!) Concerning content, the text is really a brave critique of the wisdom of Proverbs and pre-exilic Jewish thinking concerning the suffering of the righteous.

far away,” a phrase that introduces an epic battle between good and evil as a timeless conflict that is applicable to everyone. It’s also vital to recognize that the first two chapters of Job tell us—the reader—important information that Job and his infamous three friends do *not* know. We are let into a secret which is theologically dark and disturbing. And we can compound that darkness by believing that its contents are genuine historical events. I suggest the best way to view this book is as brilliant fiction that explores tough questions about “life, the universe, and everything.”<sup>4</sup> There is, after all, an element of *legend* or *folktale* to this dramatic story, whose origins may not even be Jewish but was later adapted by an editor. Some of you may be perturbed by this aspect of viewing Job as *literary*, not literal, history. That *doesn’t* mean the book of Job *just* a story, because people of faith recognize that God can speak through the genre of story, just as he can through poetry and history. Moreover, it better enables us later readers to have that necessary distance to evaluate its contents in light of the New Testament.<sup>5</sup>

In the opening scenes, the narrator cleverly flips between the perspectives of heaven and earth. In the very first verse we are told that Job “was blameless and upright, one who honored God and turned away from evil.”<sup>6</sup> He was *excessively* rich and described as “the greatest of all people in the east.”<sup>7</sup> This follows earlier Old Testament thinking that Job’s God-honoring lifestyle would be rewarded in *this* life through health, wealth, and happiness. In good Jewish fashion, God had blessed him with *seven* sons and three daughters.<sup>8</sup> Amusingly, Job was so pious that he would make burnt offerings to God after his sons had a party, just in case *they* had sinned!<sup>9</sup> All this detail reveals to the reader that Job was exemplary, and his wealth was seen as proof of divine approval and blessing. God evidently has favorites, and they are the rich!<sup>10</sup> This *Old Testament* thinking has been embraced by proponents of the so-called “prosperity gospel” today and promoted by various well-known TV Evangelists. It views the relationship between God and humankind as a *contract*: If we trust God and follow his principles, God will deliver security, good health, and prosperity in this life.

That contractual aspect is stated in the heavenly conversation between God and Satan. Let’s pause a second here, because the devil in the New Testament is depicted as an autonomous enemy of God who generally lies, deceives, and even attacks humans.<sup>11</sup> In Job however, Satan is described *very* differently as an angelic member in the heavenly court whose role is to play “devil’s advocate” to God.<sup>12</sup> Moreover,

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<sup>4</sup> A reference to *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams.

<sup>5</sup> And in light of our ongoing theological deliberations.

<sup>6</sup> Job 1:1. This is reiterated by God himself in Job 1:8; even God agrees with the narrator! See also Prov 1:7.

<sup>7</sup> Job 1:3b.

<sup>8</sup> Job 1:2. The “seven” may imply perfection. The implied monogamy in the story is interesting – again suggesting a late date.

<sup>9</sup> Job 1:4-5. This may be an example of humor, hyperbole, or irony – perhaps all three!

<sup>10</sup> This is *negated* in the New Testament, see: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/God-and-Money.pdf> ; <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Wealth-and-the-Kingdom-of-God.pdf> .

<sup>11</sup> John 8:44; 2 Thess 2:9–10; 1 Pet 5:8. See also Matt 12:22–30; 13:24–30, 36–43; 25:41; Mark 3:27.

<sup>12</sup> Satan is not presented as a liar else one would expect God to challenge Satan’s untruths concerning Job – which does not happen.

Satan *obeys* God's instructions and functions within the boundaries set by God. There is no picture of open warfare between God and the devil; clearly how Satan is portrayed in Scripture evolves! With that insight, listen to how the narrator then tells his readers of this diabolical heavenly wager: God boasts to Satan on how upright and blameless Job is.<sup>13</sup> And Satan doesn't doubt Job's devotion but cynically responds, "That's because you protect him. Job's simply in it for what he gets. He obeys you because you have abundantly rewarded his efforts with even more possessions. If you stop doing that, he will curse you to your face!"<sup>14</sup> God, replies to Satan, "OK, let's see, you are free to do whatever you want but *don't* physically hurt Job himself."<sup>15</sup> We readers are *meant* to be gripped by this provocative introduction! So, what happens next?

We are told that news reaches the family that some marauders have attacked and killed Job's farmers and stole the animals. Then lightning strikes a herd of Job's sheep, killing them and their shepherds. Then more enemies rob Job of his prized camels and kill their handlers. And to top it all off, a powerful windstorm flattened the house where Job's sons and daughters were celebrating and killed them all. Job's children, his future security, were annihilated by a natural disaster and some of his livestock and servants are similarly killed. Others were killed or stolen by bandits. And this raises *all* sorts of questions, which sadly I won't have time to address today.<sup>16</sup> What does righteous Job do? On hearing this terrible news, he tore his robes as a sign of deep mourning; he fell prostrate on the ground in humility before God. And he said, "Naked I came into the world and naked shall I leave it; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD."<sup>17</sup> Satan loses his bet with God! Despite all that calamity and personal tragedy, Job did not curse God.<sup>18</sup>

In chapter 2, our reading this morning, the theatrical drama continues. God says to Satan, "See how righteous Job is, he *still* persists in his integrity."<sup>19</sup> And Satan responds, "If you attack his body and inflict Job with illness, he will undoubtedly curse you to your face."<sup>20</sup> "OK, let's see," says God, "Do your worse—only spare his life."<sup>21</sup> So Satan causes Job to have some kind of unsightly, infectious sores or boils covering his skin from head to foot. He is socially isolated and sits on the garbage heap outside the township trying to get relief from the discomfort. His wife says, "Are you still holding firmly to your integrity? Curse God and die!"<sup>22</sup> But Job disagrees: "We receive what is good from God, don't we? In the same way we must also accept it when God sends evil."<sup>23</sup> Again, Satan lost his bet with God!

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<sup>13</sup> Job 1:8. It is as if God is a parent and proud of his son.

<sup>14</sup> Job 1:9-11.

<sup>15</sup> Job 1:12.

<sup>16</sup> See "*Does God Always Get What God Wants?* (Cascade, 2018), chapters 4 – 6.

<sup>17</sup> Job 1:21.

<sup>18</sup> Job 1:22.

<sup>19</sup> Job 2:3. And Goo adds, "Although you (Satan) incited me against him, to destroy him *for no reason.*"

<sup>20</sup> Job 2:5.

<sup>21</sup> Job 2:6.

<sup>22</sup> Job 2:9.

<sup>23</sup> Job 2:10. That God is the source of both good and evil is implied; see also: Isa 30:19–20; 45:5–7; Lam 3:37–38; Job 1:21; 2:10; 42:11; Amos 3:5–6. (Noted the added "In all this Job did not sin with his lips" in Job 2:10. The latter parallels 1:22, and

On the face of it, this is *outrageously* disturbing, isn't it? And many people, including Christians, say this account of the way God works must be true because "the Bible tells me so." I suggest this is a [category] mistake and we need to see Job's story as a *literary* exploration of the problem of suffering. The writer is laying the traditional Jewish foundations or premises in order to later question them. Put differently, the book of Job is complex, and we can't just look at the opening story in isolation from all that follows. We also have to consider the perplexing story of Job in the context of the New Testament, *and* in our continuing theological understandings of God and God's ways today. For a start, as I said last week, James—that very Jewish of Christian leaders—said that God is *not* the source of our trials.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, Jesus overcame Satan in the wilderness<sup>25</sup> and the gospel writers portray Satan as *opposing* the kingdom of God, and certainly *not* as member of the heavenly court following God's instructions.

Nevertheless, in the *Old Testament*, God is portrayed as a God of justice who rewards the good and punishes the wicked; God blesses and curses, people therefore get what they deserve.<sup>26</sup> As we will see in coming weeks, Job challenges this perceived truism. Bizarrely, in this story of Job, God delegates Satan to do the dirty work, apparently just to satisfy God's curiosity and prove that God was right all along. But wait, we might say, doesn't God *know* the future? Why does God need to orchestrate Job's suffering if he already knows Job will remain faithful?<sup>27</sup> Evidently that notion didn't cross the mind of the writer.<sup>28</sup> In this story, God's knowledge *unfolds* with time, and he allows Satan to test Job.<sup>29</sup> This throws up bigger questions of God's character and capabilities. Furthermore, this story makes a direct link with the sufferings in this world, whether by "natural" disasters<sup>30</sup> or human beings—those raiders who killed Job's servants<sup>31</sup>—to divine agency, to God's direct or indirect actions. How this connection

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the idea of blessing and cursing are both evident in Job 1-2. Some speculate that "*with his lips*" is ambiguous and implies that Job did in his heart! [The later connection with Job 3 depends on whether Job's cursing "the day he was born" as a euphemism to cursing the Creator. I personally see no need to evoke a discontinuity between Job *not* cursing God in chapters 1 & 2 and seeing Job in chapter 3 as now cursing God. Even if the prologue was a later addition, we can assume a *continuity of thought* between chapters 1-2 and 3. It contextually makes more sense (to me) to view Job as *not* cursing God in Job 3, despite his strong rhetoric. This is, I suggest, not out of place with some of forceful language within the psalms that also have a woe-is-me-in-my-unjust-calamity feel about them, without actually claiming the psalmist was also cursing God.]

<sup>24</sup> Jas 1:13. Note the Greek word translated trials or temptations are the same, cf. Heb 4:15 (NIV/NRSV). James also says that God is said to be the source of all *good* things (Jas 1:17; see also Matt 5:44-45). Personally, I believe that God is *not* the author of evil; rather, God *actively* works to bring good out of evil.

<sup>25</sup> See Reddish, *The Jesus I Didn't Know I Didn't Know* (Wipf & Stock, 2021), chapter 3.

<sup>26</sup> See Deut 28. (God is seen as ultimate origin of good *and* evil – see [22].)

<sup>27</sup> In addition to divine omniscience, there is the matter of predestination and foreknowledge. These are weighty theological and philosophical matters; how we interpret Job is always through hermeneutical *and* theological/philosophical lenses.

<sup>28</sup> If the writer was *inspired* by God, what does this say about God and his knowledge of the future?! (See also [25, 27].)

<sup>29</sup> This implies that God respects free will, which is a *genuine* freedom that God has given human beings, in this case, Job. Job's response is to *not* verbally curse God (Job 1:22, 2:10b), information the author gives us to vindicate God as being right about Job and that Satan is, so far, mistaken. (Note that Satan is never mentioned again after the end of chapter 2!)

<sup>30</sup> The natural disasters of lightening (Job 1:16) and wind (Job 1:19) while having bad consequences don't seem to be perceived by humans as evil *per se*, or random (i.e., without cause), but as *from* God.

<sup>31</sup> Notwithstanding Job's freedom to respond as he wills, the two groups of raiders are unwittingly acting with God's tacit approval and by some unspecified (causal) means presumably at Satan's instigation or persuasion.

between the earthly and heavenly realms works *in detail* is unspecified.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, the human players—Job and his wife, and later his three friends—assume this connection, and presumably so did the author. Remember, Job apparently has no knowledge of the heavenly wager—or even of Satan’s existence—and attributes *all* things, good and bad, to God’s hands.<sup>33</sup> Job has no notion that God is really proud of him and is on his side in this heavenly gamble. And the reality is that despite the graphic imagination of the writer of Job, *no one* really knows what is going on in the heavenly realm! We, like Job, have to trust in God’s character.

Let me briefly summarize: From an *Old Testament* perspective, my opening question “Why is this happening to me?” must be reframed. Since they believed God punished the wicked and unfaithful, the answer was obvious. What they *couldn’t* understand was “Why do the *righteous* suffer?” How is it *possible* that God could make bad things happen to a *good* person like Job?<sup>34</sup> That was their question—a point made obvious by Job’s exaggerated piety. Christians sometimes make that same Old Testament assumption. I too honor God: I go to church, I give generously to charity,<sup>35</sup> I do good—or at least I try my best, I have even been baptized, some could add that they are an elder or serve the church in some other capacity, so *why* do bad things happen to *me*? On one level, that may seem a self-righteous position to adopt, but that is where the book of Job begins.

Many people, including some Christians, still see their suffering as God is punishing them for past sins. God, they believe, has a long memory, and gets you in the end!<sup>36</sup> “It’s divine payback time for the sins of my youth,” they say, and God’s retribution is sometimes deemed to be through their children in some way, like childhood cancer or having a special needs child. This view is simply *wrong* and completely *negates* the concept of divine forgiveness; Christians believe God *both* forgives and *forgets* our sin.<sup>37</sup> Others think God is the source of their chronic arthritis or some other disease; “I have prayed for God to take it away, he has not, therefore God *wants* me to suffer,” they exclaim. Again, that’s mistaken, but you can see how such thinking stems from the story of Job. As I have said before, the *kind* of God we believe in matters, along with what we think God can do in the world.<sup>38</sup> The Old Testament writers imagine God as a one who controls every detail, which creates the dilemma in Job, and we will explore this further in coming weeks.

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<sup>32</sup> That ‘causal’ link is always frustratingly absent and the topic of theological metaphysics.

<sup>33</sup> Job 1:21b, 2:10b, as did Job’s wife (Job 2:9).

<sup>34</sup> See also (Rabbi) Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Schocken, 1981).

<sup>35</sup> Some Christians could add, “I tithe.”

<sup>36</sup> This is endorsed in Deut 5:8-10; Exod 34:6-7; Num 14:18. The later prophet Ezekiel *negates* this: see Ezek 18, esp. v20.

<sup>37</sup> See Acts 3:29; Heb 8:12; 10:17; Rom 8:1; (Jer 31:31-34; Ps 103:11-12).

<sup>38</sup> This theme is known as divine action or providence; see [2], chapters 4 & 5. Unless you believe in strict (Calvinistic) predetermination (i.e., a micromanager or “in control” of everything, as in traditional Presbyterianism!), Christians tend to *not* want to “own” God as the author of evil for obvious moral reasons. Some instead claim that God “permits” or “allows” suffering. I don’t buy that argument. Thomas Jay Oord puts it this way: “A God worthy of our worship cannot be Someone who *causes, supports, or allows* genuine evil.” Oord, *Uncontrolling Love of God*, 68, emphasis mine.

But there is another important concluding question: *why do we trust in God?* That is the issue behind Satan’s challenge to God. Satan thinks that Job honors God for what he can get out of it—for his health, wealth, and happiness. “Take away those three things and Job’s trust in you will crumble,” says Satan, “he will curse you and walk away.” I ask us all to reflect on why we trust in God. Are we in it for the rewards, for some kind of self-interest?<sup>39</sup> Do we believe in order to be blessed? (And what constitutes a “blessing” anyway?) If we experience the same kinds and severity of suffering as non-believers, why *not* follow Job’s wife’s advice, and curse God and die?<sup>40</sup> What *good* then is faith? If you think about that for a moment, you will recognize that’s a very utilitarian question and asking it effectively presupposes disappointment in one’s contractual perspective. Matthew records Jesus as crying out on the cross, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”<sup>41</sup> Jesus, like Job, endured *trusting*, but not knowing with certainty, that *his* God—*my* God—would vindicate him in the end.<sup>42</sup> This aspect of *trusting* is, I believe, critically important, because it implies that we *don’t* have a *contract* with God but a *relationship* and *that’s* why we persist in trusting in God.<sup>43</sup> Amen. Let us pray.

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<sup>39</sup> Our *initial* love for God may have had a self-centered intent. But (hopefully) as the relationship matures, that changes. We learn to love God for who he is and, in the process, even better love ourselves and others.

<sup>40</sup> Job 2:9. Remember, there was no firm view of an afterlife in God’s presence in the Old Testament. This was also debated in Jesus’ day: The Sadducees did not believe in the general resurrection, whereas the Pharisees did; see Mark 12:18–27; Matt 22:23–33.

<sup>41</sup> Matt 27:46, citing Ps 22:1. This is a very *relational* question: “*my* God.”

<sup>42</sup> Many Christians see Job’s steadfastness as prefiguring Christ. Note: Job *wasn’t* patient, he was steadfast. A person of faith in their time of deep suffering came to a profound and simple conclusion: “God doesn’t *owe* me anything.” Like Job, this person had come to understand that true service of God is not motivated by reward for oneself. One could also say that’s a sign of sincere trust.

<sup>43</sup> Trusting is personal; we trust friends, for example. Note, I am advocating that we trust in *God* here – in God’s *character* – *not* trusting, as often said, in God’s *plan*! See: [https://c4ort.com/essays/friends-with-benefits/?fbclid=IwAR1xIFl2EJpvbfC\\_AMVwla50ImW7QqpPqCiopso4J4PytcVP5o2nAtiYF5s](https://c4ort.com/essays/friends-with-benefits/?fbclid=IwAR1xIFl2EJpvbfC_AMVwla50ImW7QqpPqCiopso4J4PytcVP5o2nAtiYF5s) .