

# “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen”

Job 1:6-12 <sup>1</sup>

Most of you are old enough to have children, and some of you are old enough to have grandchildren or great-grandchildren. And if you’re that old, you know that part of the wonder of childhood is that children wonder about everything. Everything is new, fresh, wonder-full.

As we get older, we continue to experience wonders of many sorts, from microscopic surgery to miraculous medicines to space travel and spectacular views of the far reaches of the universe . . . but the older we get, and the more “next big things” we experience, our “wonders” tend to become more and more careful and more circumscribed. Perhaps the last of our “wonders” to diminish is our wondering about suffering. Children wonder about everything. Adults wonder about suffering.

Most of you are old enough to understand what I’m saying, and many of you know a great deal about suffering. But I’m here to tell you that nobody in this room “knows the trouble I’ve seen.”<sup>2</sup> My name is Job—you may have heard of me. I lived in the land of Uz, in what you know as “the Fertile Crescent,” four thousand years ago.

Through hard work and God’s blessing, I had become a very rich man—indeed, the richest man in the whole region where I lived. God blessed me with seven sons and three daughters, and every single morning I got up at dawn to offer a burnt offering for each of them, praying that God would forgive their sins and bless their lives (Job 1:1-5).

Not only did I have a “quiver-full of children” (Psalm 127:3-5), but I owned 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 teams of oxen, and 500 female donkeys . . . not that anybody was counting, of course. My wealth and my businesses provided employment for a good many people in the area. In fact, the economy of the whole region depended on me.

But on one unspeakable afternoon—may the sun refuse to shine on that day!—four messengers came to me within the space of an hour with news so horrible I still cannot believe it:

1. “The Sabeans raided us, stole all your animals and killed all your farmhands.”
2. “Lightning has fallen from heaven and burned up all your sheep and killed all your shepherds.”
3. “The Chaldeans raided us, stole all your camels and killed all your servants.”
4. “A powerful wind swept in from the desert, causing your oldest son’s house to collapse and killing every one of your children” (Job 1:13-19).

What do you think you would have done in such a moment? I stood up and tore my robe in my grief. Later, I shaved my head as a sign of mourning and fell on my face before God, saying, *“I came naked from my mother’s womb, and I will be stripped of everything when I die. The LORD gave me everything I had, and the LORD has taken it away. Praise the name of the LORD!”* (Job 1:21).

Now in those days—I lived long before the time of Abraham—we didn’t know much about the LORD. We didn’t have the Torah or the Prophets. We didn’t have the amazing and wonderful story of Jesus. We didn’t have God’s wonderful Book, as you do. My wife and I struggled to do the best we could in a world that had been completely shattered, but even more suffering lay ahead.

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on April 26, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen,” by Louis Armstrong.

A couple of weeks later, I came down with a terrible case of boils that covered my entire body from head to foot. We had no wonder drugs as you have today. We really didn't have much in terms of real medical treatment at all. As I sat in the ashes of grief, scraping my festering skin with a piece of broken pottery—everything in my life was broken at that point—my wife said to me, *“Are you still trying to maintain your integrity? Curse God and die”* (Job 2:8-9).

While I could certainly appreciate her frustration and despair, I told her, *“You talk like a godless woman. Should we accept only good things from the hand of God and never anything bad?”* (Job 2:10). We struggled on.

One of the many wonders of your time is the way in which you can communicate all over the world in mere seconds. It wasn't like that 4,000 years ago. It took a long time for word to get out—mostly in the course of slow travel by foot or horse or camel. Eventually, three of my good friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, learned of my misfortune, and they got together and traveled from their homes to comfort and console me.

When my friends saw me, they could hardly believe it was I. They wailed loudly, tore their robes, threw dust in the air—all signs of grief—and then they sat on the ground with me for seven days and nights, not saying a word. It was our custom not to speak to a bereaved person until they spoke first, and there's still wisdom in that, I think.

Finally, I spoke: *“Cursed be the day of my birth, and cursed be the night when I was conceived. Let that day be turned to darkness. Let it be lost even to God on high. . . . Let that night be blotted off the calendar, never again to be counted among the days of the year. . . . What I always feared has happened to me. What I dreaded has come to be. I have no peace, no quietness. I have no rest; instead, only trouble comes”* (Job 3:1-26).

Now that I had spoken and he was free to speak, Eliphaz agreed that *“People are born for trouble as predictably as sparks fly upward from a fire”* (Job 5:7), and that was helpful, but then he went on to “blame the victim,” saying *“My experience shows that those who plant trouble and cultivate evil will harvest the same”* (Job 4:8).

*“My brother,”* I said, *“you have proved as unreliable as a seasonal brook. . . . Stop assuming my guilt, for I am righteous. . . . Don't I know the difference between right and wrong?”* (Job 6:15, 21, 29-30).

Bildad took the same approach as Eliphaz: *“Does the Almighty twist what is right? Your children obviously sinned against him, so their punishment was well deserved”* (Job 8:4). Now that was a nice thing to say, wasn't it?

I replied, *“God is not a mortal like me, so I cannot argue with him or take him to trial. If only there were a mediator who could bring us together, but there is none”* (Job 9:32-33).

Zophar was no better: *“Is a person proved innocent just by talking a lot? . . . God is doubtless punishing you far less than you deserve!”* (Job 11:2, 6).

*“Well,”* said I, *“you really know everything, don't you? And when you die, wisdom will die with you! . . . People who are at ease mock those in trouble. . . . I know as much as you do. You are no better than I am. Oh, how I long to speak directly to the Almighty. I want to argue my case with God himself. . . . As doctors, you are worthless quacks. Please be quiet! That's the smartest thing you could do. . . . Oh, that someone would mediate between God and me, as a person mediates between friends. For soon I must go down that road from which I will never return”* (Job 12:2, 5, 13:2-5, 16:21-22).

Then Eliphaz lit into me again. “*You must have lent money to your friend and then kept the clothing he gave you as a pledge,*” he ranted. “*Yes, you stripped him to the bone. You must have refused water for the thirsty and food for the hungry. . . . That is why you cannot see in the darkness, and waves of water cover you*” (Job 22:6-11).

I was getting pretty angry by this point. “*I make this vow by the living God,*” I responded, “*who has taken away my rights, by the Almighty who has embittered my soul. As long as I live, while I have breath from God, my lips will speak no evil, and my tongue will speak no lies. . . . I long for the years gone by when God took care of me, when he lighted the way before me and I walked safely through the darkness. . . . Everyone listened to me and valued my advice. . . . But now I am mocked by those who are younger than I, by young men whose fathers are not worthy to run with my sheepdogs. . . . I cry to you, O God, but you don’t answer me*” (Job 27:2-4, 28:20, 29:2-3, 21, 30:1, 20).

Now there was actually a fifth person in this conversation, Elihu son of Barakel. When the others at last fell silent, he spoke up: “*I am young and you are old, so I held back and did not dare to tell you what I think. I thought, ‘Those who are older should speak, for wisdom comes with age.’ . . . But sometimes the elders are not wise. Sometimes the aged do not understand justice. So listen to me and let me express my opinion*” (Job 32:6-10).

Job, “*you have said it in my hearing. I have heard your very words. You said, ‘I am pure; I am innocent; I have not sinned. God is picking a quarrel with me.’ . . . The Almighty can do no wrong. He repays people according to their deeds. He treats people according to their ways. . . . Let me go on, and I will show you the truth of what I am saying. For I have not finished defending God!*” (Job 33:8-10, 34:10-11, 36:2).

“*By means of their suffering, [God] rescues those who suffer. For he gets their attention through adversity. . . . Turn back from evil, for it was to prevent you from getting into a life of evil that God sent this suffering*” (Job 36:15, 21).

This was, of course, the same tired argument the others had made; but while Elihu was speaking, we were all startled by a sudden whirlwind that seemed to come out of nowhere . . . and then we were terrified when the LORD himself spoke to me out of the wind: “**Who is this that questions my wisdom with such ignorant words? Brace yourself, because I have some questions for you, and you must answer them.**”

“**Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you know so much. Do you know how its dimensions were determined and who did the surveying? What supports its foundations, and who laid its cornerstone as the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?**” (Job 38:1-5).

God’s challenge went on and on for a long time, with question after question; and finally the LORD said to me, “**Do you still want to argue with the Almighty? You are God’s critic, but do you have the answers?**” (Job 40:1).

I replied to the LORD, “*I am nothing—how could I ever find the answers? I will put my hand over my mouth in silence. I have said too much already. I have nothing more to say*” (Job 40:3-5) . . . but God wasn’t finished yet.

The LORD spoke from the whirlwind again: “**Are you going to discredit my justice and condemn me so you can say you are right? . . . Who will confront me and remain safe?**” (Job 40:8, 41:11). And the questions went on.

Finally, I said, “*I know that you can do anything, and no one can stop you. You ask, ‘Who is this that questions my wisdom with such ignorance?’ It is I. And I was talking about*

*things I did not understand, things far too wonderful for me. . . . I had heard about you before, but now I have seen you with my own eyes. I take back everything I said, and I sit in dust and ashes to show my repentance” (Job 42:2-6).*

After I had offered my repentance, the LORD said to my friends, **“I am angry with you . . . for you have not been right in what you said about me, as my servant Job was. Now take seven young bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and offer a burnt offering for yourselves. My servant Job will pray for you, and I will accept his prayer on your behalf. I will not treat you as you deserve”** (Job 42:7-8).

Well, my friends did as they were told. After I had forgiven them in my heart, I prayed that God would forgive them, and the LORD accepted my prayer. After that, God healed my body, gave me seven more sons and three more daughters, and double the wealth I had had before my suffering. I lived another 140 years, and saw four generations of my children and grandchildren after me (Job 42:9-17).

As I said at the beginning, “nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen”; but the question remains about what all this meant. What was the “take away”? The truth of the matter is that people have continued to wonder about that for 4,000 years. Here’s what I think.

First of all, if you read my story in the Bible—it’s called “the Book of Job”—you’ll see that there’s a significant “back story” here that has to do with Satan, our accuser. I don’t have time to tell you very much about that now, but the back story of my suffering began with Satan’s accusation that people believe in God only because of God’s blessings—take the blessings away, he said, and humans will turn against God. That’s true for some, of course, and I was plenty upset with God, but I didn’t lose my faith in God, my trust in God. Satan was wrong to say that suffering always kills faith.

Second, my three friends thought that human suffering is always evidence of God’s judgment. That was, and is still, a very common idea. While it’s true that suffering sometimes represents God’s judgment, calling us to repentance, our Lord Jesus was very clear that this is not always the case (John 9:1-3). And it’s not ever my place or yours to decide for someone else that his or her suffering is God’s judgment. God’s Spirit is quite able to convict others of sin without our help.

Elihu was closer to the mark when he argued that God uses suffering to teach us. Suffering does cut to the core of things, and it often reveals flaws of character that sunny times do not show. For example, while most of my pre-suffering behavior was pretty decent, my suffering revealed a pride and arrogance that God dealt with decisively in the end. And did you notice that God required me to forgive my friends in order to be forgiven? Jesus would later reveal that to be an eternal principle: you and I must forgive those who sin against us in order to be forgiven ourselves (Matthew 6:14-15).

The fact of the matter is that the Book of Job never really answers our persistent question about why good people so often suffer while evil people prosper. Although the Bible is clear that all of us are sinners and none of us can really be called “good,” that answer doesn’t do much to satisfy our sense of the unfairness of life (Romans 3:12, 23; Matthew 19:17; Jeremiah 17:9; 1 John 1:8).

When all is said and done, only God knows why things happen as they do. But no matter how terrible our suffering, the Cross of Jesus and His Empty Tomb are always and forever God’s answer to our desperate heart cry, “Don’t you love me?” God’s answer is **“YES!!!!!!”**

My friends, we do well to remember that God's primary purpose in this life is to teach us to trust Him and to shape our character until it becomes more like God's character, preparing us for the Life to come. Adversity is able, as little else is, to shape our character and to strengthen our faith, as we dig our roots deeper into God in order to withstand life's storms (Ephesians 3:16-19). It's only when we have nothing left but God that we know for certain that GOD IS ENOUGH. And that knowledge is worth what it costs.

Let me close by reminding you of my anguished cry found in Job 16:21: "*Oh, that someone would **mediate** between God and me!*" The New Testament tells us that God "*wants everyone to be saved and to understand the truth. For there is only one God and one **Mediator** who can reconcile God and people. He is the man Christ Jesus. He gave his life to purchase freedom for everyone*" (1 Timothy 2:4-6a).

And that's the *real* question this morning: you've heard of Jesus; but do you know Him? Have you placed your trust in Him? Jesus is "*able to save completely those who come to God through Him, because he always lives to intercede for them*" (Hebrews 7:25).

My friends, the Mediator has come. **The Mediator is here. . . .**

Come, every soul by sin oppressed, there's mercy with the Lord,  
And He will surely give you rest, by trusting in His Word.

For Jesus shed His precious blood, rich blessings to bestow;  
Plunge now into the crimson flood that washes white as snow.

Yes, Jesus is the Truth, the Way, that leads you into rest;  
Believe in Him without delay, and you are fully blessed.

Only trust Him; only trust Him. Only trust Him now.  
He will save you; He will save you. He will save you now.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> "Only Trust Him," words and music by John H. Stockton.