

Thanks for Nothing?

Job 1:1; 2:1-10

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

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I am aware of the irony of a Thanksgiving sermon with Job as a text!

Job is, after all, a book about human suffering! Not exactly a cheery topic on a day we set aside to give thanks for the *good* things in our life.

Why not read a happy Psalm that steers us straightforwardly toward gratitude? *Give thanks to the Lord! His love endured forever.*

On the face of it, Job is kind of a miserable companion for a day we often set aside to remember what is good in our lives.

But the more time I spent with this passage and the story of Job in general this week, the more I became convinced that this was, in fact, a very appropriate Thanksgiving text.

We'll see if you agree in about 15 min.

The story of Job is a remarkable one.

It is written like an ancient parable to address some of the biggest and most timeless questions human beings have ever asked.

- Why do human beings suffer?
- More particularly, why do the *righteous* suffer?
- What good is faith?
- Can God be trusted?

Job has it all—money, land, livestock, servants, a wife and kids. He’s living the dream. He’s a devoted religious man who is faithful to God and who continuously offers prayers and sacrifices on behalf of his family. He’s “blameless and upright,” to use the language of the Bible.

Satan and God are having a chat one day and God can’t help but brag about his prize student. “Have you seen Job? There’s no one like him out there! He’s faithful and true in every way!”

Satan snorts and says, “Well, yeah! Of course he’s faithful! He’s living on easy street. Who *wouldn’t* be faithful if they had life as good as Job? He loves you because of what he gets out of the deal! Take all of his goodies away and then you’ll see how faithful Job is.”

So God says, in essence, takes the bet. “You’re on.” Go ahead, take your best shot.”

Satan does just that. Job suffers calamity upon calamity in rapid fire. He loses his livestock, his labour force, and eventually even his children.

But through all of this he keeps the faith. He is devastated, but he stays true to God.

“The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21)

So God says to Satan, “See, I told you Job would keep the faith.” Satan replies, “Let’s see what happens when I go after Job himself.” Again, God agrees, and says, “Ok, but you have to spare his life.”

Job is then afflicted with all kinds of painful sores.

It’s pitiful scene in the end: Job, having lost it all, sitting on a pile of ashes scraping his itchy sores with a piece of pottery.

If it was me, I would be thinking something like, “Thanks for nothing, God!”

His wife tells him to curse God and die (we should probably remember how grief-stricken she would have been too—the losses were hers, too, not just Job’s!)

And then, Job utters these famous words:

Shall we receive good from the hand of God and not receive the bad (Job 2:10)?

It’s an interesting question, isn’t it?

Perhaps some of us would say, “no!” We’re happy to receive good from God and attribute it to him.

This is what we do on Thanksgiving—we give thanks for the blessings in our life. For the love of family and friends, for material blessings, for food and shelter, for health and strength, for meaningful work, for a free country in which to live, etc.

These are gifts from God, and our gratitude for them is entirely appropriate.

But what about the bad?

What about the devastating diagnosis? The lost job? The fractured relationship? The failed pregnancy? The depression? The crippling debt?

What about when the crops are still in the field and it snows in October?

What about the countless tragedies that happen every day—to us, to those close to us, or even to perfect strangers?

Are these, too, “from God?”

Can Job help us understand these things?

Is it possible to receive from God both the good and the bad. Is it possible to say, “The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord?”

Is it possible to say, as have already sung, “Whatever may pass and whatever lies before me, let me be singing when then evening comes?”

I think it *is* possible. And I think that Job *does* help.

I want to conclude with two important aspects of who God is and what it means:

1. The Sovereignty of God

Many people struggle intellectually with the idea that suffering is allowed by God.

It can be psychologically and spiritually crippling to think of our worst miseries as coming directly from the same God who is “gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, rich in love” (Psalm 145:8-9)

But conversely, the idea that suffering is random and takes place *apart* from God’s control is also considered intolerable by many.

The hardest funeral I have ever done was that of a ten-year-old daughter of a friend of mine who died of an asthma attack at her brother’s soccer tournament.

I had many conversations about suffering with the girl's parents, at the time of her death and after.

One thing that they *clung* to—fiercely, at times—was the conviction that God had some higher purpose in this. It was all that kept them going.

They were determined to follow the words spoken by philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff, after the death of his own son:

I shall look at the world through tears. **Perhaps I shall see things that dry-eyed I could not see.**

There are some things—about God, about the world, and about ourselves, that perhaps we cannot see “dry-eyed.” This was certainly the case with Job, who, in the course of the book, comes to a deeper understanding of himself and of God.

(*How* Job does it is worth noting, not least because his deeper understanding comes via a thirty-five or so odd chapter intense dispute with God about how he didn't deserve his suffering! One of the things that Job absolutely gives us permission to do is argue with God.)

I think the example of Job reminds us that we have to hold two important things together, even if it is difficult:

1. We don't know everything, and we certainly don't understand the meaning of suffering or the role God plays in bad things in our life. Like Job, we have no idea what is going on “behind the veil.”
2. We are convinced that God is sovereign over his creation and that he is guiding the story of our world and *our* own personal stories to a good future.

In other words, the story of Job is a story about trust.

2. The Love of God

Job is a story about trust. I think it's also a story about love. This isn't as obvious, although I'll try to make it clear.

I think that the question at the very heart of the book is this:

Do we have faith because we love *God* or because we love what God can *do* for us?

Is God a glorified insurance policy? We roll up our sleeves and do our best to believe enough right things and do enough good things in the hopes that we'll get stuff from God? Things like health? Wealth? Well-adjusted kids? Fulfilling work? Inner peace?

Are these prizes that God doles out for good behaviour? Is our relationship with God like my relationship with my little dog Woodchuck, who loves me when I feed him and scratch him behind the ears, but not so much when these things are withheld?

I was thinking about these questions as I drove back from Saskatchewan on Friday.

I think that if we're honest, we have to admit there's at least a bit of self-interest involved in our faith. We *do* have faith, at least in part, because of what we hope to get out of the deal.

We *do* believe that God has purposes for human beings and that if we align ourselves with these purposes, we'll have better lives, now and, ultimately, in the life to come.

But we also know that we might suffer. Perhaps not like Job—we certainly hope not—but nobody really avoids hardship in this life.

We see the history of some of Jesus' disciples who were all martyred for their faith. We see people in our own lives whose faith has been stronger than ours who were still visited by tragedy and suffering.

So we know it's not a simple formula where belief in God = a life of blessings.

But we also know that *God* is not a math equation but a lover.

The best analogy I could think of this week was that of a parent.

As human parents, we know that our kids must go through hard times. We know that they will not become all they can be or should be if everything is handed to them with ease. We know that some lessons they not be able to learn "dry-eyed."

It hurts us to watch them suffer. Sometimes terribly. Sometimes they are the instruments of their own suffering, sometimes they are not. But we never stop loving them, never stop longing for them to become what God has created them to be.

I don't know about the rest of the parents out there, but I don't want my kids to love me simply because of what they can get out of me.

If my kid said to me, *Yeah, I love you, dad, as long as you keep feeding me and paying my cell phone bill and giving me the keys to the car, and mostly just staying out of the way the rest of the time...* I don't think I would find that very satisfying.

That wouldn't be a relationship, it would be a contract (and a very poor one, for me!).

Might the same be true for God?

In the story of Job, God says, in essence, "I don't want you to love me only when I'm dispensing goodies. **I want you to love and follow me because of who I am.**"

And who is God? Well, for that, we will transition from the pulpit to the table.

Before that, we will sing a song—a song that proclaims who God is and what God has made possible for us, for the church, and for the world.

But for now, on this Thanksgiving Sunday morning, regardless of what blessings we are grateful for or what trials we are presently enduring, we pause to say, a determined and hopeful thanks. *Thanks* be to God.

Amen.

