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# GOD

## On Trial (Job 1:1- 2:6)

By Ronnie Norman

David McKenna, in *The Whisper of His Grace*, says there are three questions every one of us will ask at some point in our lives: Why me? Why this? Why now? How do we handle it when life hands us something we did not expect and do not want? How do we cope with and manage life's disappointments? From time to time, when I meet someone who has been deeply disappointed in life, I wonder what his or her future holds, don't you? When I see someone grieving the loss of a relationship, or lamenting the loss of a dream, I wonder what the future holds for such a person. Will he turn into a bitter, cynical person, seething with anger towards God and the church? Or, will he be a person whose losses become part of his witness for God? Will she, by God's grace, once again embrace life with optimism and spiritual passion? Or will she choose to curse God and quit?

To some degree, the answer usually hinges on our theology of disappointment. All of us bring to our relationships with God certain hopes, dreams, and expectations. We pray about these important matters and ask God to bless them. We ask for his blessings over our jobs, our marriages, our children's happiness, our parents' health, our boss' attitude, and our car's transmission. But sometimes, to borrow a phrase from Gordon MacDonald, we all face a "broken world experience." It may come through a moral lapse of our own where the consequences linger long after the repentance. It may come through the relational breakdown of a marriage or the rebellion of a child. It may be a sudden

tragedy that snuffs out the life of someone much too dear to die. It may take the form of a financial setback that leaves us working harder for less money. Or it may be an illness that leaves us a shell of what we once were. It may be the realization that our lifelong vocational dreams just won't happen.

For some, it is the daily grind of a difficult life that eats away at our optimism. We're struggling day after bone-tiring day just to keep our heads above water. Our marriages are so-so and our jobs are monotonous. We never dreamed life would be so routine, so tiring, so relentless. How should we respond when we do not experience what we expected from God? Did we expect too much from God? Or has God let us down?

All of us have tasted the bitterness of disappointment. Disappointment is universal. It occurs when our experiences don't measure up to our expectations. Ask the wife whose husband of twenty-seven years left her for a younger woman. Check with the executive whose company downsized and left him jobless eighteen months shy of retirement. Interview the young couple whose friends are buying cribs, while they keep on seeing the fertility specialist. Meet with the minister whose dreams to build a healthy, vibrant, fresh church have been slammed on the rocks of traditionalism.

The story of Job is the story of a man's deepening relationship with God. The adversities and disappointments that came Job's way forced him to discard his simplistic "do

good and get good; do bad and get bad” cause-and-effect theology of life. The first two chapters of Job are integral to the story as they set the stage for the heavenly wager between God and Satan, making us privy to inside information that Job himself does not know. Unknown to him, Job himself is the central character in a heavenly test of character and faith. Satan accuses Job of loving God only because of the good gifts he provides. According to Satan, remove the gifts and Job’s faith will erode as well. Will Job love God in the bad times as well as the good times? Would Job trust God amidst the crumbling ruins of his life? Does Job live his faith, or does Job use his faith to secure good gifts from God? What is Job’s core treasure: his comfortable life or his relationship with God? These questions form the plot for the book and are the basis for the heavenly wager.

### **Job’s Assets (1:1–5)**

The opening statements of the book of Job introduce us to Job as a complete man of impeccable integrity. He is not perfect, but he is authentic in his walk with God.

Job strikes us as one who “has it all.” His family is happy and sizable. His business is thriving. His name is respected. His estate is vast and his wealth immense, particularly as a man in an eastern culture in which wealth was measured by land, servants, and animals. He has 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, 500 female donkeys, and many servants. Job is described as “the greatest man in all the east.” While abundance breeds arrogance and spiritual amnesia, that is not the case with Job. He passes with flying colors the spiritual test of prosperity, as indicated in Job 1:1: “Job was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil.”

### **Job’s Ally (1:6–12; 2:1–6)**

At 1:6, the curtain of invisibility is removed, and we are allowed to peer into the realm of the heavenlies. Job knows nothing of this scene, and it is centrally important to the story that Job has no knowledge of it. But we, the readers, are given a backstage pass into the heavenly scene.

In this realm we get a majestic view of God seated upon his throne, granting an audience to the approaching angels. Among the parading angels is Satan, having returned from a mission of roaming throughout the earth. The conversation between God and Satan quickly focuses on Job’s righteous and blameless character. The Lord boasts 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 (1:8).” He testifies of Job’s fidelity and refers to him as “my servant Job.” The story line allows us to sense God’s favor upon Job. The Lord is Job’s ally, standing unashamedly in his corner. The Lord boasts of Job’s fidelity, confidently referring to him as “my servant Job.”

### **Job’s Adversary (1:6–12; 2:1–6)**

Few statements are as insulting to the credibility of a relationship as “I feel used.” No one wants a relationship with ulterior or superficial motives, but that is precisely the slander that Satan hurls against Job. He insinuates that Job worships God only because of God’s good gifts and that he is simply kissing the hand that prospers him. Satan questions the quality of Job’s love for God and wonders aloud if his righteousness will stand the hostile test of adversity.

Satan’s taunting question, “Is Job good for nothing?” is the foundational question of the entire story. Betting that Job uses God more than he loves God, Satan is permitted to test the purity of Job’s faith. And though there are a myriad of reasons why difficulties come into the lives of God’s people, the fundamental reason Job suffers is to suppress the blasphemous allegations of Satan and prove that a person will esteem God even in the face of severe loss.

The story of Job reminds us that Satan is a strong, slandering, scheming, strategist who plays to win. If we are believers, he aims to make our faith benign, our influence weak, and our spiritual passion dull. He wants us to be saltless salt and thorny soil, so detoured by the adversities of this life that we seldom produce spiritual fruit.

The good news is that Satan is limited in his scope and intensity of attack. He is not God’s equal, and he operates under God’s sovereignty within set boundaries. He is a devil on a chain, but he is a formidable adversary. Take a deep breath and read what Satan does to Job. It is not pretty reading.

### **Job’s Adversity (1:13–19)**

Meanwhile, back on earth, Job is enjoying his righteous and prosperous life when suddenly, disaster strikes in dramatic form. Job becomes another of God’s suffering servants. Satan’s ability to be involved in the affairs of men, to influence people, weather, and armies, shocks us.

In a matter of hours, Job loses it all, experiencing more trauma than most of us can envision in a lifetime. First, attacking Sabaens and Chaldaens raid his estate, steal his

belongings, and slaughter his servants. Second, a lightning strike destroys even more livestock and kills additional servants. Third, a whirlwind levels the house in which Job's ten children are sharing a meal. There are no survivors.

Job quickly becomes too well acquainted with grief. Grief is something we feel when we lose something precious. It could be a home, a job, our sense of control, or a life's dream. One divorced woman told me that she didn't miss her ex-husband's adulteries and drunken rages at all. Yet her divorce still created deep emotional trauma because it represented the loss of her dreams. She had never expected the experiences that came her way.

Job's loss of his life's work is staggering enough, but the added grief of losing all ten of his children is an emotional blow that almost seems unbearable. If someone dies slowly, at least there is an opportunity to express love and say goodbye. But when a sudden death occurs, we feel doubly cheated when the goodbyes are left unsaid.

Job knows what happened, but he does not know why. He is learning that he may have misunderstood the ground rules of his relationship with God. His righteous life is not insulating him from hardship. In fact, if he knew the whole story he would know that his righteous life precipitated these hardships. Like Job, we will also be targeted by the evil one in his attempts to erode our confidence and unsettle our faith. If we are going to navigate safely through life's difficulties, we must expect them. Anticipating adversity is half the battle; otherwise, we'll be disillusioned and wonder why God has disappointed us. Being a Christian does not exempt us from difficulty. We may still get cancer, our parents may have Alzheimer's, we may endure unfair criticism as a result of our ministries, or our mates may walk away. And the purposes for such disappointments are not always easily discernible.

If we are committed to God's kingdom, Satan will hurl his arrows at us. Satan hates what God loves. And for an era of time, God allows Satan to harass and attack us. The Lord exhorted the church in Smyrna with these words: "Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you a crown of life" (Revelation 2:10). God may allow this testing for the purification of our faith, or as a stage on which our faith is showcased, or for reasons unknown to us.

### **Job's Allegiance (1:20–21)**

We are concerned about Job. His trials are not imaginary. He's not some hysterical whiner with imaginary woes. His losses are severe and his grief legitimate.

God allows Satan to attack Job's family, estate, wealth, and health in order to reveal Job's treasure. God allows Satan to mine for Job's gold. God permits Satan to discern where Job's treasure lies. On trial here is the quality and significance of God's relationship with Job. How will Job respond to a whirlwind of disappointment? How will Job manage his losses? Will he curse God and die? How much is God himself worth to Job?

Job passes round one of this cosmic character test with flying colors. Even after his world is shattered, Job responds with worship, blessing, and faith. Job's response in 1:20–21 is an inspiring, exhilarating passage of scripture: "At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said: 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised.'"

Job's perseverance in the early stages of his test is a precursor to the rest of the story. Say what you will about Job—he certainly asks his share of questions and does his share of self-justifying—but he doesn't give up. He does not douse his hope even when answers are slow or absent. He tastes disappointment and lives in a broken world, but does not quit.

### **Four Observations:**

1. *When God allows us to be tested, even those commodities that are most precious to us may be touched.* I read the first chapter of Job with deep anguish because people lose their lives, among them all ten of Job's children. Each child was a prize in Job's heart. He loved them all and shared special memories with each one. It just doesn't seem right that ten young people should die and lose their futures as a result of Satan's test. But God has allowed Satan to mine the heart of Job in search of his core treasure, even if that means touching his children to determine Job's spiritual fiber.

For a period of time, the evil one is permitted to walk the earth, exert some degree of power, and attack God's people through an arsenal of deceptive weapons. As he

searches for our points of vulnerability, the tests will be painful—or they wouldn't be legitimate tests.

When Satan is allowed to test us, he does so only with God's permission, and God uses it for his glory. Nothing comes into the life of a believer that is beyond God's knowledge and permission. Nothing comes our way that surprises God and that is beyond his ability to harness for his glory. God will not allow the devil to test us beyond our ability to bear, though at times it may seem painfully so.

2. *Events that are seen must be understood in light of realities that are unseen.* Job didn't even consider Satan's involvement or the influences of the unseen world. It all seemed so natural, so matter-of-fact to him. The culprits were the Sabaens, the Chaldeans, a freakish lightning strike, and a tornado.

It would have been so much easier for Job if he had known the behind-the-scenes conversations between God and Satan. Had he known he was the central figure in this cosmic test, had he known his importance, had he known these purposes behind it all, perhaps he could have managed his losses with greater confidence. Instead, his life was shattered out of the seemingly blue sky, without warning and without context.

Like Job, we are known and discussed in the spiritual world of the unseen. Our foes are not flesh and blood, but evil forces in the heavenly realms. Our weapons are not material in nature, but spiritual. From our box seats as readers of Job, God reminds us of an unseen world of divine purposes about which we know only a part.

3. *Every adversity in life positions us to know God and glorify God in new and unique ways.* Our particular experiences in life uniquely shape us to be used by God for his eternal glory. Job's unparalleled abundance and subsequent loss of that abundance uniquely positioned him to glorify God in an extraordinary way.

I recently attended a funeral for a thirty-nine-year-old doctor, whose bone cancer was discovered only eight months before his death. I watched his wife and six children sing and express grace. I listened to the deceased man's brother eulogize him as a witness for Christ. He affirmed his brother's ambassadorship for Christ as a son, student, athlete, husband, father, Christian, doctor, and as a patient.

He emphasized that even his brother's sickbed became a platform from which he brought glory to the name of the Lord.

Like Job, this man's core treasure was his relationship with God. When the peripheral gifts such as health and comfort were gone, this man still held tightly to the Giver of life eternal. And in a world full of superficial faith, that kind of authenticity gains an audience among those with ears to hear.

4. *At issue during any hardship is the fundamental importance of our spiritual covenant with God.* If we are more overwhelmed by our pain than by our sin, then we will have a demanding spirit before God. If we prioritize material and emotional health over spiritual health, we will be expecting God to demonstrate his love for us primarily in material ways. We will await him to fix our loneliness, heal our bodies, increase our salaries, or give us children. But if we are more overwhelmed by our sin than our pain, we will worship God for his cleansing grace.

Satan wagers that we're walking more by sight than faith, that we focus more on our pain than our sin. He bets that we're more concerned over our inconveniences than our impurities. He thinks our righteousness cannot stand the test of adversity. He was wrong about Job. Is he wrong about us?

*Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings. And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.*

1 Peter 5:8–11

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