

*Then Job answered the Lord and said: “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. ‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’ Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. ‘Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you make it known to me.’ I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.” After the Lord had spoken these words to Job, the Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite: “My anger burns against you and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. Now therefore take seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and offer up a burnt offering for yourselves. And my servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly. For you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.” So Eliphaz the Temanite and Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite went and did what the Lord had told them, and the Lord accepted Job’s prayer.*

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

If you were to ask people what they find to be the hardest book of the bible to understand, I think that most would say it is the book of Revelation. But right behind it would be the book of Job. More than a few sermon requests have come from people looking for answers on understanding this book of wisdom in the Old Testament.

Those who have read through the book of Job understand the struggle that confronts us in the book. We see a good man—a man in whom even God boasts—who, none the less, is afflicted with great trouble and despair. Moreover, it seems that God Himself is causing the suffering of one of His children. At the very least, God allows this suffering, permitting Satan to take away Job’s family, his wealth, and even his health. How can a loving God allow this suffering? How can a righteous God seem to be so unfair?

It is the problem of suffering that leaves most people struggling with the book of Job. It doesn’t help that we often feel that Job’s story is our story, too. We feel confused. We wonder why God allows certain things to happen in our lives. We all face times when life is tough; times when we find ourselves struggling against affliction. In those moments we cry out like Job. From some deep, hidden recess of our sin-filled hearts we find ourselves doubting God, questioning His goodness, uncertain of His love for us. We are confused. What have I done to deserve all this, God? Why me? When will it all end?

Reading and studying the book of Job isn’t the easiest task. But it is extremely rewarding. What we learn most from the book of Job is that when the going gets tough, God is still there. It is not always clear to our minds nor to our hearts as to why certain things happen in our lives. But no matter how tough life is, God has an answer for us that is greater than our question, “why?” The answer is His grace—that grace which delivers His people beyond the cares of this world into the sure, certain and eternal hope that is ours through the One who has suffered even more than Job: our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

You’ve probably heard the words of the old spiritual: “nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen. Nobody knows my sorrow.” Don’t we feel that way at times? Suffering is typically something we have to do on our own, because we feel that no one understands just what we are going through and how tough our life really is. We have been told that into every life a little rain must fall. But why do we have to be the ones washed away by a torrential flood?

And what is the world’s view of the evil in our lives? It is the assumption that comes through Job’s friends, shown in their discussions with Job in much of the book. According to them, we suffer because we have done something deserving of punishment. We suffer as punishment for our misdeeds. Even the unbelieving world has the idea of “bad karma” that comes back to haunt you. When our actions are evil, or when we are hurtful to others, the belief of so many in this world is that we get what we deserve as some mysterious force balances everything out.

What makes Job so difficult to understand is the illogical reality of things. At the very beginning of the book, God Himself says of Job: *“Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?”* (Job 1:8 - ESV) This does not mean that Job was sinless, but that he was a man who trusted in God and sought to live in God. Job was blessed. He had a large and happy family. He was wealthy, one of the wealthiest men, if not the wealthiest man of his age. Human logic says that it should be this way. Job should be blessed if he was truly

a good man. But that all changed fairly quickly, as raiders steal his flocks and herds; a tornado destroys the house where his children are gathered. And if that wasn't enough, his health is attacked too, as painful sores cover him from head to toe. He is miserable, in pain, and virtually destitute. Why would such a good man be allowed to go through such terrible trials and pain?

And where is God in the midst of all our suffering? That was a big question asked after the 9/11 disasters—where was God? It was the question asked after the floods in Texas swept away a group of schoolchildren from a church camp. It is the question that is asked when a young child is killed by a car in an alleyway, or when wildfires devastate a community as we have seen rather frequently here in Canada. It is the question that we may ask when any trouble or disaster or illness comes upon us. Where are you, God? Why is this happening to me?

To be honest, God never answers that question for Job. He doesn't always answer it for us. What God does say to us is: "Trust me. I haven't forgotten you. I am still in command of all things. I will indeed work for your good". Above all else, God assures us that when the going gets tough, He is still there. God says to us: ***"Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!"*** (Psalm 46:10 - ESV) He is at work in all things—and He reveals His glory. What He calls us to do, and what He wanted Job to do, is to trust in Him, no matter what. As strange as it may seem to us at times, it is a gracious God who uses suffering to test and to teach. Paul echoes this very thought when he tells us: ***Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.*** (Romans 5:1-5 - ESV) In the midst of his suffering even Job is forced to look deep in his heart, to learn that there are the temptations to put our trust in ourselves, rather than in the mercy of God. Job complains to God that things aren't fair. Job does come very close to accusing God of being evil. Thankfully, Job never abandons God. Even in his sometimes thoughtless words, Job is willing to speak openly and honestly with God. That is why God commends Job in our text, while condemning his friends and their misguided advice, for they did not speak to God, even while claiming to speak for God. God also makes it clear that He has never abandoned Job. When God does answer Job, He simply reminds Job that God is God. He is above all things. He is holy and right in all He does. He works to reveal His glory. And His glory will be evident in Job's life, too. Job learned that lesson, and acknowledges in our text today: ***I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.***

The only one who can truly understand how God is present and active, even in the face of great suffering, is the person who has experienced both the apparent separation from God, and the marvellous assurance of His help. And, yes, God does know the things that are troubling us. He knew all that was happening in Job's life. Remember the words of that old spiritual, again: "nobody knows the trouble I've seen. Nobody knows but Jesus." Not only does God know what we are going through: He has actually done something to take away the hopelessness of our empty existence. Just before His crucifixion, Jesus tells His disciples: ***I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.*** (John 16:33 - ESV) That is the hope that we have when life is tough. Jesus has overcome the world. He has come to defeat the devil for us. The Lord of Glory leaves His glorious home in heaven and comes into this world of suffering and pain to deal with the very thing that lies behind all the toughness of life. He came to deal with sin itself. He puts Himself at the mercy of our Adversary, the devil, and strips him of His power. But our victory doesn't come without cost. It costs the very life of the Lord of heaven and earth that is sacrificed for our victory. Did Jesus deserve to suffer the pain of the cross? Was it fair? We hear that cry from the cross that is so beyond our comprehension: ***"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*** (Matthew 27:46 - ESV) When we are going through those tough times in our lives, maybe we feel that way. God, you have forsaken me. You have left me all alone in my misery. But even though we may feel that way, the truth is that God is still with us. When Abraham was frustrated because God's plan didn't seem to be unfolding in the right way, God assured him: ***"Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great."*** (Genesis 15:1, ESV) In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus first tells us: ***"do not be anxious about your life."*** (Luke 12:22, ESV). Then He assures us: ***"Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."*** (Luke 12:32, ESV) Our Epistle speaks of the saints of old, who had their struggles, but who trusted in God. We are told: ***"These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth."*** (Hebrews 11:13, ESV) That is true for us. We are exiles on earth. Job said: ***My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle and come to their end without hope. "Remember that my life is a breath; my eye will never again see good.*** (Job 7:6-7 - ESV), but he is also able to say with hope and confidence: ***For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.*** (Job 19:25-27 - ESV)

Job learned that the only answer to suffering—and the only hope we have when life is tough—is that God has not forsaken us. He has given us Himself as our Redeemer. He has saved us through His death on the cross. He has taken away our sin and its condemnation and He destroyed the very power of death as He rose again from the dead. It is in Him that we have hope that is greater than the troubles of life. Jesus lives, and we will live in Him. Jesus lives, and Satan's power over us is destroyed. Jesus lives, and we are not trapped in a hopeless, helpless and empty existence. In the Lord's time, in accordance with His grace, He will take away from us what we do deserve, namely the whole suffering of eternal torment in hell, and replace it with the joyous life with Him in heaven. And that life will not be tough; it will be bliss forever. Amen.