

## **JOB IS OUR HERO IN TIMES OF SUFFERING**

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In times of suffering, we need heroes. Heroes are people who overcome deprivation, disruption, uncertainty, and fear. Heroes are role models who struggle against adversity and win. Sometimes in the worst moments they fail, but ultimately they become better persons *because* of the affliction.

In the Bible Job is a perfect example. According to the Prologue of the book (chapters 1—2), he was the best in every way as a righteous, prosperous sage, but under duress he also typified mankind's erroneous thinking about God.

In reality, we can speak of three "Jobs": Job 1 is the person before his affliction, when God blessed and honored him; Job 2 is the person during his time of suffering, when God seemed distant and uncaring; and Job 3 is the person after his affliction, when God again blessed and honored him.

### ***Job 1***

The first verse of chapter 1 reveals four traits that distinguished Job before his trial: "blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil." He was "blameless," as were Noah, Abraham, and David. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, "blameless" is translated as "sincerity" and coupled with "faithfulness" (Josh 24:14). It is rendered as "integrity" that flows from a "heart" that serves God (Gen 20:5, 6). "Upright" indicates faithful obedience to God's statutes and righteous relationships with others. Indeed, Job was faithful in all his ethical and religious obligations, otherwise he said: "I would have been false to God above" (31:28). In all these ways, Job showed that he "feared God" and "turned away from evil."

### ***Job 2***

However, an evolution occurred in Job's mental and emotional posture during the seven days that he sat in silence and deep suffering (2:11—13). He lost almost everything: family, fortune, friends, health, and hope. He greatly lamented the reversal brought about in his life and expressed deep nostalgia for the past. He wrote: "I was at ease, and he broke me apart; he seized me by the neck and dashed me to pieces" (16:12). Referring to his former life, Job commented: "Then I thought, 'I shall die in my nest, and I shall multiply my days as the sand'" (29:18). He expressed a profound sense of loss: "My days are past; my plans are broken off, the desires of my heart" (17:11). In the end, Job's emotional state was shattered. He wished that he had not been born (3:3), that God might put an end to him (6:9), that he will never again see good (7:7), that death is close at hand (9:25; 17:1), and that his hope was destroyed (14:19b). For all these reasons, Job stated three times, "I loathe my life" (7:16; 9:21; 10:1).

During his affliction and when Job referred to God in the third person ("he," "God," "Almighty"), the harshest expressions appeared. He testified that God "crushes me" (9:17), "broke me apart" (v. 12a), "set me up as his target" (v. 12b), "worn me out" (16:7a), "stripped me from my glory" (19:9), "made my heart faint" (24:16), and "cast me into the mire" (30:19). In the second person Job said directly to God: "You scare me with dreams and terrify me with visions" (7:14), "made me your mark" (v. 20b), "I became a burden to you" (v. 20c), "contend against me" (10:2b), "know that I am not guilty" (v. 7), "write bitter things against me" (13:26), "persecute me" (30:21b), and "you will bring me to death" (v. 23a). Indeed, the dissonance was so acute that Job determined that God's absence was actually preferable. For this reason, he prayed four times: "leave me alone" (7:16, 19; 10:20; 14:6).

### **Job 3**

Still, Job was of two minds. Though the dissonance was very great, he complained *to* God and affirmed truths *about* God. He did not forsake his faith. He did not embrace another worldview. Rather, his descent into cynicism occurred with reference to the God of the Bible. Even as he spoke foolishly, he professed hope: “I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth” (19:25). He confessed a longing for divine nearness: “Oh, that I were as in the months of old, as in the days when God watched over me, when his lamp shone upon my head, and by his light I walked through darkness ... when the friendship of God was upon my tent, when the Almighty was yet with me” (29:2—5a).

Indeed, he demonstrated godly fear. He endured affliction and perplexity *coram Deo* (with reference to God). He prayed often and spoke constantly about God. He lamented the loss of God’s presence, his friendship, and he longed to hear his voice. He realized that only a direct encounter with the Lord would resolve his dilemma. One commentator says: “But even as he curses, Job’s theology is good in the sense that Job rightly values God and God’s favor more highly than any earthly blessing.” Despite all that transpired, Job’s spiritual North Star remained true. And when the Lord confronted him with his sinful thoughts and words, he responded as one who truly feared God and said: “I repent in dust and ashes” (42:6).

### **We are Job**

In this way, Job was both a model (Job 1 and 3) and an antitype (Job 2). At his worst, he exhibited grievous features of ungodly thinking (Job 2). At his best, he was also a representation of piety in the Old Testament (Job 1 and 3). His deepest motives derived from godly fear, even under extreme duress. He suffered, prayed, spoke, and contemplated with reference to God.

Most likely, we will *never* reach the pinnacle of rectitude that Job possessed. Nor will we likely suffer so intensely. However, we *will* replicate many of his errors. We will likely complain bitterly during affliction and blame God. We will probably question his motives and wisdom.

So in this sense, we are *all* Job. We all suffer and try to make sense of life, often incorrectly. We are, as he was, a confusing mix of good and bad, wise and foolish, humble and proud.

But, Job is our hero, a model, and example. He showed the way out of the labyrinth of suffering and cynicism and doubt—continual repentance rooted in the fear of the Lord.