# The Wager

## Scripture: Job 1

**By Pastor John H. Noordhof**
**Williamsburg Christian Reformed Church**

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People of God: The reality of suffering in our world cannot be ignored nor dismissed. It confronts us every day. Even at the Olympics, this grand celebration of winter sports was marred by a death, so that in the opening ceremonies a moment of silence had to be taken. Death intruded into what was suppose to be all fun and games.

Of course, the earthquake in Haiti, with its scenes of death and destruction, was a stark reminder of the suffering of our world. And though the media has slowed down in its coverage of this event, the suffering and misery continues for the people of Haiti and will for a considerable amount of time.

And though people raise questions about the role of God in these events—a topic we considered a few weeks ago—the intense questions arise when the suffering becomes personal and direct. It's when we suffer, battling disease or addiction; it's when our families are torn apart by strive; it's when we see our loved ones suffer or are taken away from us that questions arise: Why could God allow this? How long do I have to keep on struggling with this disease? Where is the healing and peace, you have promised to give us in Jesus Christ?

These are the honest questions believers struggle with every day. These are legitimate questions that believers wrestle with. As Psalm 13 puts it: *How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? Look on me and answer, O Lord my God*.

Job would know exactly what the Psalmist is going through. He too asks these questions. He too wants to know what happened in his life. Why did this happen? Above all, where is God in the midst of his suffering?

Whenever Christians reflect upon the problem of suffering and evil in our world, eventually you have to turn to the Book of Job. This is the classic case of suffering. The whole book centers on this problem. And so, Philip Yancey, in his book, Disappointment with God—a book I'd highly recommend for those struggling with these issues—ends by focusing on this Book of Job. Job is the classic case about suffering.

After all, here we have a man, devoted to God stripped of nearly everything he has. The text stresses that he was a righteous man—a man like Noah, Abraham, and David. He was blameless and upright. He feared God and shunned evil. Not that he was perfect. But he was a righteous, God-fearing man. His relationship to God was in order.

That's a crucial point. Because what happens to Job, does not happen because he was a sinner or did something wrong. Rather the opposite is true. It's because he was a good man, a God-fearing man that he ended up in the ash heap. That's a point Job's three friends couldn't comprehend—as we'll deal with more extensively next week. It also turns the "health-and-wealth gospel" on its heels. "An American rabbi once wrote a popular book called "When Bad things happen to good people." The Book of Job raises the ante: it portrays the very worst things happening to the very best person." (p. 185)

And the list of "worst things" is daunting. One messenger after another comes to Job with devastating news. Economically, he is wiped off the map, as 7000 sheep, 3000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen and 500 donkeys, were all taken away. All of his servants were put to the sword. Then came the personal blow of having all his children—seven sons and three daughters killed at one time. Then in chapter two, we are told how Job's health was taken away from him, as he was afflicted with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the top of his head. Seemingly overnight, the greatest man in the entire East was reduced to the most pitiable. And to top it all off, Job's wife is not supportive and his friends think it all Job's fault.

Job, the classic case of suffering. But when we consider the story of Job in the season of Lent, we immediately place this story along side of another person, another suffering servant of God, Jesus Christ. Jesus too was a righteous man, completely perfect. Jesus too suffered. A different type of suffering. Perhaps not as obvious as Job, at least not until the end, but it was a suffering that was more intense than Job's—as Jesus was humiliated from the moment of his birth—having left the glory and majesty of heaven behind to enter a sin-stained, evil plagued world—a suffering that will end on the cross, enduring the very forces of hell.

And so, we need to read the story of Job in the light of the story of Jesus. Of course, that is true of the entire OT. But too often Job is treated as

a treatise on suffering, without considering the larger story in which Job is placed. A story that centers on Jesus Christ. And so, Lent is a good backdrop to read and study this OT book. Ultimately, Jesus is God's answer to Job's questions. And in Jesus' suffering and death, Job's suffering is vindicated.

Chapters one and two set the stage for the lengthy dialogues that follow. They are crucial to what follows. In these chapters, we get a glimpse of what is going on behind the scenes. We get a heavenly perspective of this event on earth. We get to know something that Job does not know—that Job never learns. Not even at the end.

Philip Yancy explains it this way: "It helps to think of the book of Job as a mystery play, a "whodunit" detective story. Before the play itself begins, we in the audience get a sneak preview, as if we have shown up early for a press conference in which the director explains his work. He relates the plot and describes the main characters, then tells us in advance who did what in the play except one: how will the main character respond?….

"Later, when the curtain rises, we see only the actors on stage. Confined within the play, they have no knowledge of what the director has told us in the sneak preview. We know the answer to the "whodunit" questions, but the star detective, Job, does not. He spends all his time on stage trying to discover what we already know." (p.186-7)

What is it that Job is trying to figure out in the book? It's the question: why me? But that's a question to which we already know the answer. Job is at the center of a great Wager between God and Satan. That's what the first two chapters of Job reveal to us.

Maybe this description of a wager, a bet, doesn't seem right. After all, it sounds too much like gambling. And yet, a test is going on. And Job is at the center of it. A test over Job, between God and Satan.

What do we make of this scene, where God holds court in heaven, and all the angels appear before the Lord, including the Accuser? That's what the word Satan means, the Accuser. Notice that the Lord holds everyone, including Satan to account. Satan must appear before the Lord and answer his questions. Satan cannot do what he wants to Job, but only what the Lord allows. God remains sovereign and in control. In this wager between God and Satan, we do not have a battle between two equal powers. Satan is a mere creature who, despite his ability to create chaos in the world, is completely accountable to the Lord.

When the Lord points Job out as one to whom the Accuser can make no accusation, the question becomes whether Job's faith and righteousness is due to the blessings of the Lord upon him. Sure, it's easy to have faith in God, when everything is going your way, but what happens when things go

against you? Satan is sure that when that happens, Job will desert God. God, however, is confident in Job and allows Satan to wreck havoc in the life of Job. The wager, the test is on.

As a result, the central question of this book is not "why me?" It's not first and foremost about suffering. Instead, the question is: Will Job have faith in the midst of his suffering? Or will he deny God?

The readers of the book know why Job suffers. We have the inside view. We know what happened behind the scenes. Job doesn't. He never does find out. He struggles with the question, why me, not realizing that the more essential question is whether he will remain faithful to the Lord.

Perhaps that is an important lesson for us as we deal with the suffering in our lives and in our world. We need to look behind the scenes to see the real dynamics of what is going on in our world. We need to gain the heavenly perspective of what is happening in our world.

But, to be honest, we are not given the day-to-day workings of God's plan of redemption. We're just given the broad strokes of what God has done in Jesus Christ to overcome sin and suffering, evil and injustice. How your suffering fits into that plan, how the suffering of Haiti fits into the unfolding of God's Kingdom, we do not know. We will probably never know, not even in the new creation.

But what we are given is how the story of our lives and the story of the world will end. For those who remain faithful to the Lord, we will experience the new creation. And that is made possible through the suffering and death of Jesus.

In the suffering and death of Jesus, we have the climax in this conflict between God and Satan. In looking at his suffering and death, we also need to see behind the scenes. The religious leaders thought that they were getting rid of a nuisance; the Roman authorities thought they were getting rid of a threat to the order of the Empire; but in the cross, Jesus defeated the enemies of God: sin, death, and the Accuser. Ironically, it was through suffering. Through the very means Satan attempted to undo Job, God used through his Son to redeem the world. Through the suffering of Jesus comes salvation.

And so the question of Job is, not so much a question about suffering, but whether in suffering, Job will have faith in God. And how do these opening chapters end? Chapter one: "In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing." Chapter two: "In all this, Job did not sin in what he said."

And so in the midst of suffering, we are called to faith. That is the great test. That's the great challenge. To remain faithful to the Lord. But we can hold on to him, because, as Paul says in Romans, we know how through

the suffering and death of Jesus, our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. (R 8:18) Amen.