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The storm breaks

Please read Job 1:1–2:10

According to Ezekiel, Job was one of the most godly men who had ever lived (14:14, 20).

Some Christians leave a testimony that continues to shine to future generations long after they themselves have departed this world. Lives like these encourage us to live as they did. Think of how the lives of William Carey, or David Brainerd, or Amy Carmichael still speak to us today. How important it is to live a godly life—for the sake of others as well as ourselves! Job lived that way. Ever since the story of Job was first written down, believers have turned to it for help and encouragement in the midst of life’s appalling trials.

Scene 1: Job—the man of God (1:1–5)

After telling us his name, ‘*Job*’ (1:1), and that he hailed from ‘*Uz*’¹—a large territory east of the Jordan (cf. ‘*the East*’ 1:3),

which included both Edom in the south (Genesis 36:28) and the Aramean lands in the north (Genesis 10:23; 22:21), the opening section mentions several aspects of Job's life, underlining his immense integrity and faith. Chief amongst them is his *wisdom*: Job '*feared God*'—the hallmark of biblical wisdom (Proverbs 9:10; cf. 1:7). It is, as we shall see, a wisdom gained from knowing Jesus Christ, 'who has become for us wisdom from God' (1 Corinthians 1:30). For Job, Jesus Christ was still only a promise that God had made, a promise that one day a Redeemer would come. Yet he believed that promise, as did many others before and after his day. His faith, together with that of others who similarly believed the promise, was reckoned to him as righteousness (cf. Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:3).

Job was not an Israelite, but from the 'east'. Nevertheless, true faith transcends national boundaries, for it is immediately evident that Job was a true believer. His trials are all the more painful because of it. Many in Job's day entertained the notion that faith ought to alleviate trouble, not increase it. This is a view that continues to trouble faithful men and women of God. It is one of the abiding lessons of the book of Job that Christians can expect to suffer. Even if the *cause* of suffering remains a mystery, the *fact* of it does not. Some of the wisest and godliest have known lives of the most excruciating tragedy. Reckon on it, the Bible seems to say to us, and you will not go far wrong. Protest, and you will discover that it will only add to your difficulties. In God's ordering of our lives, for reasons best known to him, he allows some features to be bent out of shape. There is, in each one of our lives, to cite a phrase of Thomas Boston, 'a crook in our lot'.²

Job's wisdom

In the space of one verse, four ways are found to define Job's

wisdom: he was *'blameless'* and *'upright'*, he *'feared God'* and *'shunned evil'* (1:2). The idea that Job was *'blameless'* (the Authorized Version renders it *'perfect'*) may appear to suggest that Job is being credited with perfection! That would be a fatal misunderstanding. Job was not sinless. Later he confesses his sin quite openly (6:24; 7:21, and especially 42:1–6).

Blamelessness is a recurring theme (8:20; 9:20–22 (three times); 12:4; 36:4; 37:16) and means *'personal integrity'*. Uprightness is closely related to the word for *'righteous'* and means *'a faithful adherence to God's statutes and an honest, compassionate manner in relating to others'*.³ These two features manifested themselves in two contrasting directions: Job *'feared God and shunned evil'* (1:1).

1. Positively, Job feared God

Fearing God is the very soul of godliness. It is the attribute, above all others, that reflects a right relationship of a sinner to Almighty God. It is the response of a sinner towards the greatness of God. Reverence, awe and submission are its chief components, as is the notion of being afraid when there is just cause for it. A person who fears God puts God first in every area of life. God is not thought of as an equal, still less an inferior, but an all-powerful, all-knowing, everywhere present God who may do with us as he wills.

Fearing God is not the cowering gesture of one who is terrified by God, though unconfessed, unmortified sin in our lives may, and should, elicit such a response. Rather, it is an honest acknowledgement that God is greater than us in every way. We are never on his level and that is why submission becomes a crucially important issue in Job. Above everything else, Job's attitude to God will eventually be seen to be one of

acquiescence. Job may not, indeed, does not, understand what is going on in his life, but he resolves to place his trust in God. As Thomas Boston put it, ‘The discerning of a Father’s hand in the crook will take out much of the bitterness of it, and sugar the pill to you.’⁴ As a sinner—and Job is always aware of that fact—God is angry with Job’s sin. As a Sovereign, God has every right to use Job in a way that brings him ultimate glory.

Job’s attitude, thus far at least, was one of unquestioning submission to God, ever careful to acknowledge the Lord as King in his life. He was careful never to speak *about* God, or *to* God in a flippant, ill-thought manner. He avoided attributing to God motives ill-befitting the sovereign Creator and Redeemer. He sought each day to abide by the rule that God should be glorified in his life. In this way Job feared God. Of course, it is easier to acknowledge God’s goodness when life is free from pain. That is the test to which Job is now put: will he continue to fear God when everything around him is giving way?

2. *Negatively, Job shunned evil*

How important it is to have this negative element to our lives! Nine of the Ten Commandments are couched in negative terms: ‘You shall *not* ...’ (the only one not in that form is the fifth: ‘Honour your parents’). Saying ‘No’ to sin is something we have no capacity to do without the help of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. Christians display evidence of their regeneration in their desire to avoid occasions for sin. Turning *from* sin and *to* God is the simplest, but most comprehensive, understanding of what repentance is all about and repentance is the reverse side of faith. Together, faith and repentance constitute the two vital elements of saving religion. They constitute, according to the Puritan Thomas Watson, the two wings by which we fly to heaven.⁵

Repentance was a daily feature of Job's life. Luther included in his exposition of the true nature of Christianity, which he nailed to the Wittenberg church door in 1517, the following thesis: 'When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent" [Matthew 4:17], he willed that the whole life of believers should be one of repentance.' Luther, like Job, sought every opportunity to shun that which God hated.

Philip Henry, a Puritan who died in 1696, when challenged that he made too much of repentance, said that he hoped to carry his repentance up to the gate of heaven itself. One of the sure signs of holiness is a growing concern for personal righteousness. Job was aware that sin lay at the root of every attempt to dissuade him from honouring God, with his body and soul, and therefore he was on guard against its every temptation, be it from the flesh, the world, or the devil himself. He avoided unnecessary contact with the fallen world; he chose his close companions carefully; he rigorously rooted out known sin in his life, applying the rule that mortification was the only way to deal with sin; and this was the pathway to glory.

In all of this Job displayed consummate *wisdom*. It is a key to Job's life as people knew and witnessed it. It is the key that unlocks the door to what the book of Job is essentially about: 'The fear of the Lord—that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding' (28:28). Job feared God and dealt ruthlessly with known sin and this was the secret of his eminent wisdom. As Calvin wrote, 'Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.'⁶ Job emerges as a man who knows God and knows himself. It is a picture of what God wants us to be and, by his grace, what we can become.

Job's wealth

For some, the record of Job's godliness sits ill at ease with his vast wealth. The Scriptures are unashamed about the connection: *'Also, his possessions were seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred female donkeys, and a very large household, so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the East'* (1:3). There is no hint that Job's wealth had been acquired in some illicit way, though this charge will be made by some of Job's companions later. On the contrary, Job's attempts to fulfil his rôle as a man of God in the world in which he lived had been blessed by God. He was given a large family, *'seven sons and three daughters'* (1:2), and an enormous fortune (1:3). According to his own testimony, he *'dwelt as a king among his troops; I was like one who comforts mourners'* (Job 29:25). Not only that, but following the trial his fortune was doubled (42:10).

Solomon's great wealth was regarded as a sign of God's favour (1 Kings 3:13), as was that of Job's contemporary, Abraham (Genesis 12:2-3; 13:2); and Isaac's wealth was to become a source of great envy to the Philistines (Genesis 26:14). The attainment of material prosperity is not in itself wrong, of course; it is the *love* of money that is the root of all evil (1 Timothy 6:10). That is why office-bearers in the church, who are to be characterized by a transparent godliness, are warned not be lovers of money (1 Timothy 3:3). Before his conversion, money had meant everything to Zacchaeus, but a Spirit-wrought repentance changed all that (Luke 19:8). It was the love of money that brought down Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:2) and principally Judas, whose thirty pieces of silver were more valuable to him than a good conscience towards God. *'You cannot serve God and mammon,'* Jesus said (Matthew 6:24).

Wealth brings its own temptations: ‘But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort’ (Luke 6:24). ‘No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon’ (Luke 16:13). ‘Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal’ (Matthew 6:19). ‘Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God’ (Matthew 19:24). ‘Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses’ (Luke 12:15).

Scripture pours scorn on the wrong *use* of wealth, not the mere possession of it. It was John Wesley who said, ‘Gain all you can, save all you can, give all you can.’⁷ Wealth is not in itself a sign of God’s favour: God has reasons why he makes some wealthy and others poor. Had William Carey’s early life not been so painfully poor, one doubts whether his tenacity would have survived the hardships of India.

In handling his great wealth, Job was impeccable and unimpeachable. What makes pleasures right, good and valuable, or wrong, bad and sinful is often determined by that which accompanies wealth. The motivation and outcome of our pleasures need to be examined. Do we chase after them as though they were all-important? Wealth, if acquired righteously and used wisely, is a blessing to be enjoyed for God’s glory. But dangers are near, including self-indulgence and greed (Luke 8:14; Hebrews 11:25; cf. Isaiah 58:13; 1 Timothy 5:6; 2 Timothy 3:4; Titus 3:3; James 4:3; 5:5; 2 Peter 2:13), and along with these come boredom and disgust (Ecclesiastes 2:1–11). Job, however,

was 'blameless' and 'upright' in the management of his personal affairs.

Job's watchfulness

Enduring afflictions and watchfulness go together in Scripture (2 Timothy 4:5). Job's watchfulness extended beyond himself to the needs of his family. Acting as priest, Job offers a '*burnt offering*' (1:5) on behalf of his family (and presumably himself). Having seven sons and three daughters (both numbers and their sum being symbols of completeness) meant that Job's large family needed to atone for their sins, a responsibility that fell upon the father of the household. The picture of domestic bliss portrayed here is enhanced by Job's assumption of the rôle of chief priest within his own family. Domestic bliss is broken when fathers fail in this rôle. Job's sons and daughters have come together for some family celebration, but Job deems it appropriate that spiritual realities are placed first.

The sin Job fears his children may commit is that they may curse God in their hearts. This is the very sin that Satan hopes Job will fall into (1:11; 2:5) and to which his wife will urge him (2:9). He offers a burnt offering (the commonest: performed every morning and evening and on holy days) on their behalf. It was his habit to do so. Whole burnt offerings were for general sins (Leviticus 1) rather than for specific sins, for which sin offerings were prescribed (Leviticus 4:1-5:4). They made atonement for man. The idea lying behind the sacrifice is that of the payment of a ransom. It is a prefiguring of the one who would come 'to give his life as a ransom for many' (Mark 10:45). In contrast to the burnt offerings offered up by the priests each day, Christ offered up *one* sacrifice: he died 'once for all when he offered himself' on our behalf (Hebrews 7:27).

All of this provides us with a picture of an idyllic home. The family has always received special emphasis in Scripture. It is a spiritual unit and a place of training for children to grow into patterns of mature adult character. It is a community of teaching and learning about God and godliness, and one can only assume that Job's children were presented with a model of fatherhood that embodied the finest elements of what God intended it to be. Job's children were instructed in godliness by their father, as the Bible directs (Genesis 18:18–19; Deuteronomy 4:9; 6:6–8; 11:18–21; Proverbs 22:6; Ephesians 6:4). Furthermore, they were encouraged to take what they were taught seriously and use it as a basis for their own lives. Evidently, as the burnt offerings suggest, they were taught from their earliest moments about sin. Job did not spoil his children, nor camouflage the seriousness of their transgressions. He taught them to grow up through their childish folly to mature adults who might display a wisdom that they saw evidenced in their father (Proverbs 13:24; 19:18; 22:15; 23:13–14; 29:15, 17). Job could say, as did Joshua, 'But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD' (Joshua 24:15). Building a strong family was one of Job's priorities.

Scene 2: The heavenly council (1:6–12)

'One day the angels came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came with them' (1:6). The scene is one of a heavenly council in which the 'angels'⁸ (1:6) are reporting to God. Apparently, there are occasions when the angels relate to God their activities. The verb 'to present' (1:6) means to 'Station yourself before someone', to await orders. 'It's like when the colonels meet with the general to discuss tactics and receive their final directions,' comments Mark Littleton.⁹ Prominent among the angels is Satan.