

JOB'S FIRST TEST

Job 1

By Leo Douma
4th February 2007

When I did my Master's degree in psychology, my dissertation project was based on what's called the Attribution Theory. Simply stated the theory says that we human beings need to be able to attribute a cause for why things happen. Especially if something bad happens in our lives, we need to know why, we need to be able to attribute it to something, something that caused it. The theory says we have great difficulty, even great fear, in not being able to attribute a reason for something happening. The idea that things could happen randomly, they could even happen to us for no real reason, is awfully threatening. So much so that we will make up a reason rather than leave it unanswered. As many of us know, Job is the Old Testament book about suffering. As if that is not bad enough, because we all find it hard to cope with terrible suffering, Job seems to suffer for no good reason. The book makes it clear that our main character is a very good man, a deep believer, a servant of God. But he suffers unbelievably, more that most of us could cope with. When his friends come to comfort him, he tells them of his struggles with what God is doing to him. But his friends are strong believers in a cause-and-effect theology, that is, if you sin God will punish you. So are you suffering? Well, then you must have done wrong. And so they keep telling him to confess his sin. But Job knows there is nothing like that in his life and so he demands a response from God. Eventually God does respond. He basically displays his awesome power in creation and providence to which Job responds by realizing how puny he is in comparison to God and he deeply humbles himself before God. In terms of cause and effect God's answer is no answer. He doesn't explain himself. And yet it is the answer-trust God and keep the faith. In the end this book of Job is not so much about suffering as it is about faith, about knowing God for who he really is and worshipping him completely. The book is 42 chapters long, most of it (chapters 3-41) being long (winded) speeches between Job and his three friends as they argue back and forth. The speeches are in poetic form and much of it is very majestic and deep in its language. But not everything said in the speeches should be taken as correct because many things said by the three friends is based on a wrong theology. You cannot just chose a verse here and there and preach on it. You really need to read the book as a whole to get the impact of what's going on. The book starts with two chapters of prose prologue that sets the scene

for the speeches. It's the first chapter of this introduction that I want to deal with this morning.

The book opens with the words *"In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job"*. We don't know where Uz was or anything about Job apart from what's in this book, expect that he was in the time of the patriarchs, Abraham and Isaac etc. The book is one of the oldest in the bible. Without a genealogy like other bible characters have, Job just steps on the scene and goes again. He is in a sense "every man", one of us. His story can be any one's story. Now the writer makes it clear, from the outset, just how good a man, how great a man Job was. Note verse 2: *"This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil."* The writer is not saying Job was perfect, we all know every human is a sinner. But this man truly loved God and did his utmost to do the right thing. When it says he *"feared God"* we think of the phrase in Proverbs: *"The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom"*. To fear God meant to be a truly devoted worshipper of God, to love Him with your whole life. It meant to be truly related to God, to acknowledge that you didn't really know anything unless you knew God and did things His way. It is not for nothing that the book commences with this description of Job. This is the key point- the truly good and wise person suffering- not a vile or evil person creating their own havoc and mess. God had blessed this wise, deeply pious man very richly. He had a large family (*"seven sons and three daughters"*) and was enormously wealthy (even more than Abraham): *"seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen..."*. He was a pastoralist with all his sheep, a huge trader using all those camels for the trade caravans, an agriculturalist, farming large tracts of land, a stud breeder, a boss over a vast number of servants. As our text says *"he was the greatest man among all the people of the east."*

Job was also blessed with a wonderful and close family. They all loved to get together as often as they could. The sons were already living out of home, but made a point of inviting each other and ensuring the sisters who were still at home came along too. What is interesting to note is Job's custom of offering a burnt offering after each time they got together. The impression is not that they were riotous and drunk with their feasts. They were good people. But Job, being a very pious man, being the father and the priest of his family, he prayed often for his family, he offered the general sacrifice for sin, just in case they *"sinned and cursed God in their hearts."* Here is another hint into the character of Job. He is so keen on doing right, on ensuring that God is always honoured.

His big fear was to “*curse God*”. It meant he felt one should not think little of God, or argue with Him, not even with a doubt in one’s own mind or heart. This cursing of God will come up as the key issue, but here already we get an insight into how Job feels about God and relating to Him.

Now, from verse 6-12 we have a change in scene. We move from the earth to heaven. Having given us clues about Job, the writer now gives us insight into the spiritual realms unseen on the earth. This is background stuff that Job is not privy to. We see a meeting in heaven between God and his angels. They come to report on their activities. One of those presenting himself is “*the Satan*”. In this book the full theology of the devil, Satan, has not been developed yet as we have it in the New Testament. He is called “*the Satan*” which can be translated the “accuser”, the “opposer at law”. He is the trouble maker, the disturber of the heavenly kingdom. Now we note how in verse 7 God brings up Job 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.*” Note how it’s the exact same language as verse 1. In other words God himself makes clear how faithful and obedient Job is. He is God’s “*servant*”. There are few in the Bible who received that title, Jesus, God’s son being one of them. In Ezekiel 14:14 we read of Job being listed as one of the three greatest men in the Old Testament: “*Noah, Daniel and Job*”. There is a sense in which God wants to make clear to Satan, the accuser, who is pointing out the miserable failure of so many human beings, that Job is one who is truly a servant of God, one that God himself delights in and can hold up as a wonderful example.

But the Satan is very cynical, and very knowing of human failure, and basically says to God, in verse 9 & 10, “Get real. He only does all of that because of what you give him. *Does Job fear God for nothing? Does Job worship you just because he loves you? Look at all you have given him. Look at his vast fortune, all his great kids, his great standing in the community. Of course he worships you. He knows what side his bread is buttered. But what if you take it all away? Will he still love you and serve you. “Stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to his face.*” Now here is the central issue. Why do we, why do you, serve God? So that you can be well off- serve God and he will bless you. Why do you serve God, so he will look after you, so you can go to heaven? Why do you go to church, to feel good? Why do you love God, simply for who he is? If God takes away all you have, will you still love him? Will you then fight with

him, get angry him, feel robbed, feel cheated, robbed of your rights. Will you then curse him because he has failed you- he has not provided what you expected? How can you do this to me? The Satan has the finger right on the pulse. Here is the test. Do you truly want a deep personal relationship with God, and Him alone, or is yours a friendship for what you can get? So often deep suffering tests this very point. So often suffering brings us closer to God because it forces us to cling to Him and not his gifts. (We are not saying wealth, rich blessings are wrong. It was God who gave all Job had, and it was good. But the question is, is that why we love God- for the good stuff or for him even without the good stuff?)

How does God respond to this cynicism of the Satan, this accusation against his servant Job? Note verse 12. *“The Lord said to Satan “Very well, then, everything he has is in your hands, but on the man himself do not lay a finger.”* Is this some sort of bet, a wager as some commentators call it? Is this God and the spiritual realms playing bets using human lives a spawns? Not at all! God has full confidence in his servant. He doesn't need to find out if Job is up to it, or play games with Satan. God will have all heaven glorify Him as His servant Job remains faithful to him even in the most trying of circumstances. Not all human beings are rebellious obnoxious sinners. Not all human beings are just in it for themselves. There are those who bear witness to their great love for God and in doing so bring great honour and glory for God. The one who did that the greatest was Jesus, God's own Son, God's servant, who obeyed all the way to the cross. So often to understand suffering, there is no earthly explanation, but it makes sense from the spiritual side. I meant it in this sense. Let Satan be silenced, let the power of evil be over come by the faithfulness of the servants of God. One of the key lessons we see in this scene in heaven is that it is God who is sovereign, God who is in complete control. The devil is powerful, but still only a servant of God. Too often certain theologies present a dualism, a struggle between good and evil, between God and the devil as if they are two equal warring partners. But they are not. The devil may roar like a lion, but he is a lion on a chain. He can go only so far as God allows (Note: *“on the man himself do not lay a finger.”*). There is only one master of this world and he has complete control.

Now in verse 13 the scene shifts again. Now we are back on earth. We are back with Job and his family, his land and possessions. Job has no idea of what has been decided in heaven. Only we as readers are privy to the true nature of what's going on. This is

essential to appreciate what's going on when we get to the long speeches. Job and his friends are not privy to the discussion in heaven. In verse 13 all is happy and tranquil. The family is together again enjoying another fine time, even sipping the wine. That's when all hell breaks loose and tragedy rips this scene apart. So often that's how it goes doesn't it? All seems so well when out of the blue comes the heart attack. The trip was so enjoyable when the car smash destroys everything. Job on this day gets one sledge hammer blow after another. One messenger after another tells of all his possessions being taken or killed, and then the most devastating, heart rending news that all his kids have been killed in one go, all ten of them. We know what it is to hear bad news. We know the agony, the cry that rips from our lungs. We have all suffered, but surely not to the extent of Job on this day. There are just no words to describe Job's loss. We are stunned into silence as we see Job at this moment. And all of heaven waits. How does he respond? Will Job in his agony cry out against God and curse him for this suffering, for this wrong, for this evil against him and his family.

Read with me from verse 20-22: *“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.’ In all this Job did not sin by charging God of wrong doing.”* The tearing of the robe, the shaving of the head was the typical Middle Eastern way to express grief. That we expect. But note the next line: *“Then he fell to the ground in worship.”* He did not curse God to his face as Satan predicted. He does not cry out “Why God?” He worships God. In his grief he clings to God. He embraces God. And as he does so, he recognizes who God is- Lord of all. We have no rights before God. We have no life and independence before God. We are utterly dependent on what God's hand gives. He has complete right to determine our lives. We are born naked, we will leave naked. The Lord can give and he can take away. Job does not just love God for what God gives. He loves God for who he is in Himself. And in so doing Job recognizes the awesome majesty and sovereignty of God. You notice that Job doesn't blame secondary causes. He doesn't have a go at the devil or the Sabeans or Chaldean raiding parties. In his deep faith he sees all things coming from God. And that God has every right to give and provide or to take and remove as he pleases. He is God. He is Lord. What an awesome witness. What an awesome display of obedience to God. The only display more profound than this was that of Jesus, as the terror of hell nearly overwhelmed him, and he prayed: “Not my will but yours be done.”

In this first test, Job is truly a great witness for God. Here was a man who trusted God even without knowing all we know about God's love shown in Jesus. Sometimes in our own suffering we may have doubts. But then we look at the cross of Christ and see Jesus suffering. We know that God's deep love for us, his grace for us is displayed in that ultimate sacrifice of His son for our sin. But Job didn't know all that about the Christ. In a sense he was a type of Christ, clinging on to God in worship even in the midst of his deepest suffering (as Jesus did in hell). In the next weeks we will see more of Job's struggle. This is not the whole picture here. But we are left with the question. Why do you worship God? Because of all the good he gives you? Or simply for who he is as the complete Lord of all. Will you love him in your struggle and pain? Will you acknowledge his right to have his way with you? What witness do you provide for the glory of God? You might say "Be gentle on me, God hasn't finished his work with me". I'm not sure I'm up to that level of faith yet. That's OK, Job still needed much to learn. But we will see that in the coming weeks.