

THE TEST

by Ray C. Stedman

The book of Job is, perhaps, the oldest book in the Bible. No one knows who wrote it. Some scholars think it may have been written by Moses, and perhaps it could have been, while some date it as late as the time of Solomon. But one thing is certain: this book was given to us by the Holy Spirit. It is a very profound book and in many ways it touches upon certain themes more deeply than any other book of the Bible. It is also a very beautiful book and it is written in majestic, glorious language.

Job was a real man, not a mythological figure. He is mentioned by Ezekiel and he is classified as one of the three great men of the Old Testament, along with Noah and Daniel. He is mentioned also in the New Testament by James, who refers to Job's patience and steadfast endurance. According to the opening part of the book Job lived in the land of Uz, and he was probably one of the most prominent citizens of that land. He was a contemporary of Abraham, most likely, so this book goes back to the very beginnings of biblical history.

As we will see, the book is a kind of epic poem, very much like *The Illiad* and *The Odyssey*, by Homer. Some think it was presented at times as a drama in which actors recited the parts of the different characters in the book. Most of the book is poetry but it begins and ends with a prose prologue and epilogue, which are like program notes that are given to the audience in this drama.

Chapter 1 gives us the setting, and introduces the main character, Job, and we are told first of his piety, Verse 1:

There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was blameless and upright, one who feared God, and turned away from evil. {Job 1:1 RSV}

The most noteworthy thing about Job, evidently, was his godliness. He feared God, and everyone knew him because of that. The Revised Standard Version says he was blameless, and many who have read that thought it meant that Job was sinless. But it is not the same thing. You can be sinful and still be blameless if you have learned how to handle your sin the way God tells you to. Evidently Job had learned how to handle sin, so, in that sense, he was blameless.

I do not think, however, that this is the best translation of the Hebrew word that appears here. It is really a word that means "a complete man." Job was well balanced and the reason he was well balanced was that he feared God. He was not a materialist, he did not just look on life as a means of getting ahead in the world. Job also was aware of God, and he saw God's hand in everything he did and that made him a complete man.

Job was not a theologian either. He was a practical, down-to-earth man. I think these terms are best explained by the last part of Verse 1: "He feared God, and turned away from evil." That is, he was complete because he feared God; he was upright because he turned away from evil.

The second thing we are told about Job is that he was very prosperous, Verse 3:

He had seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, and five hundred she-asses, and very many servants; so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east. {Job 1:3 RSV}

Job was well known for his prosperity. He sounds like a rich Texas cattleman! God gives riches at times, and riches are not necessarily wrong, by any means, although we are warned about the danger and deceitfulness of them. But here was a man whom God made rich.

The last thing we are told about Job personally is his love, his fatherly concern for his children, Verse 4:

His sons used to go and hold a feast in the house of each on his day [on his birthday] and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. And when the days of the feast had run their course, Job would send and sanctify them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all; for Job said, "It may be that my sons have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts." Thus Job did continually. {Job 1:4-5 RSV}

Now that little phrase, "cursed God in their hearts," becomes a kind of theme to the book of Job. Ultimately, that is the test to which Job himself is put: Will he curse God in his heart? This was a matter of great concern to Job about his children. He had seven sons, and as each had a birthday, that meant seven times a year they had a feast to which they invited their sisters. What Job did, according to the record, was the equivalent of our holding a special time of prayer for someone we have a concern about. Job offered burnt offerings, because he recognized that his children needed spiritual help most when things were going well, not during times of stress. I think this indicates a great deal of spiritual insight on the part of Job. He knew that the pressure to deny God, to forsake God, comes most strongly when things are going well.

Job did not offer a sin offering, because that was something only the sinner himself could do. (Sin offerings are of no value if you do not repent of the sin.) So Job offered a burnt offering which, in the Scriptures, is always a symbol of total dedication to God, an awareness of God's rightful ownership of us. When Job made this offering he was expressing the burden of his heart for his children, that they might be wholly God's. He was praying for them by means of this burnt offering. So we have this picture of Job: a godly man, a great landowner, and a good father.

In Verse 6 the scene suddenly shifts to that world of invisible realities which, in the New Testament -- especially in the epistle to the Ephesians -- is called "the heavnlies." It is not off in space somewhere, it is right around us but it is invisible to us. We are separated from it by an invisible barrier so that we cannot see what is going on in that invisible world where God and Satan, angels and demons, function. Suddenly the curtain is lifted. Just as the servant of Elisha, whose eyes were opened at the prophet's prayer so that he saw the mountain ringed about with the chariots of God, our eyes are now suddenly opened to this drama, and we see what is going on behind the scenes. We see what Job himself could not see, Verses 6-12:

Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them. The Lord said to Satan, "Whence have you come?" Satan answered the Lord, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." And the Lord said to Satan, "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?" Then Satan answered the Lord, "Does Job fear God for nought? Hast thou not put a hedge about him and his house and all that he has, on every side? Thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But put forth thy hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse thee to thy face." And the Lord said to Satan, "Behold, all that he has is in your power; only upon himself do not put forth your hand." So Satan went forth from the presence of the Lord. {Job 1:6-12 RSV}

This is surely a most impressive scene, very similar to what John describes in the fourth chapter of the book of Revelation, where he sees tens of thousands and thousands upon thousands of angels gathered in the great audience chamber of heaven, in the very presence of God himself. These angels were called the sons of God because, like Adam, they were a direct creation of God's hand. But, unlike Adam, they were not given the authority nor the command to multiply and produce others like themselves. No one knows how many angels there are. There seems to be countless numbers of them, but all of them were created by God, directly, and in this instance, were present before God to give a report of their activities.

I think we need to fling back the borders of our imagination in a scene like this, and realize that God is interested in far more than this little dark planet of ours. In the whole of the universe, as scientists are looking at it today, there are many guesses as to how many other planetary systems there are like ours, and how many other inhabitable worlds are out there in the millions of galaxies that span the heavens. No matter how many there are one thing is clear, both from science and Scripture: it all adds up to a universe. one place, and God is

in control of it all.

These ministering angels, then, came to report, and in the midst of them is Satan. Satan means "the Adversary", and that is how he first appears in the book of Job. You can see him there with all the angels and obviously he has already fallen. In the books of Isaiah and Ezekiel we are told how he fell. Once the greatest of the angels, now lifted up by pride, Satan has become the enemy of God, the rebel within the kingdom of God. You can see him sauntering about among the angels, hands in his pockets, or picking his teeth, disdainful of all the rest, looking for an opportunity to accuse.

I think the significant fact in this account is that though he clearly is fallen, he still has access to God. That is what we must yet recognize about Satan: he has not been excluded from God's presence. There are books you can pick up that suggest that he is bound in hell, or that he is committed to a kind of furnace room in the universe, but these are distortions and far from the actual truth. Satan is granted access to heaven, and in that fact we have the first hint of the reason for the book of Job: This book has tremendous things to say to us about the reasons for suffering.

Why do innocent, righteous people sometimes undergo terrible episodes of tragic injustice and suffering? This book will help us greatly with the answer to that question.

But there is still a deeper level of truth behind the book of Job. Basically, it is given to us to reveal the relationship of Satan and God, so that we are not confused about the power of this vicious enemy against whom we all wrestle. Satan is not the equivalent of God. We do not have two gods, a good god and a bad god, struggling against each other. This book helps us to understand right from the start that God is in control of all things. All forces are at his command and nothing ever takes him by surprise. Nothing goes beyond his word and his will. including Satan.

This book, I think, will help us more than any other book in the Bible to catch a glimpse of the greatness and the majesty of God. We will see what we desperately need to see -- that God is not just another man, great in power and authority, whom we call, influence and command. God is not a heavenly bellboy, ready to run at our command. No, God is in charge, and he will always be in charge. If we are going to deal realistically with life, this is the way we must see him.

We sometimes hear that this book of Job is the record of a great battleground between God and Satan, and that Job is caught in between. Now, though there are aspects of this in the book, is this not a strange war, in which one side must get permission from the other before it attacks? What kind of battle is that? Can you imagine a German commander during World War II stepping up to General Patton, saluting him and saying, "Herr General, we would like permission to bomb your troops, to destroy your tanks, and to wreck all your plans!" I'm sure General Patton's reply would have been unprintable, and unrepeatable from this pulpit! And yet that is the situation you have in this book of Job. Satan comes to God and asks permission to do something against Job. Now that is not a battle; it is not warfare; it is a test. That is what we need to see. Job's faith is the subject of a very rigorous test. Satan is the one who brings it about, but God permits it.

I think the striking thing about this account is that it is God that challenges Satan, not the other way around. God says, "Satan, where have you been?" "Oh," says Satan, "I've been here and there, looking over the earth, trying to find somebody." And God says, "Have you taken a look at Job? There's a man that I'm proud of!" God's own assessment of Job is that there is none like him in all the earth. Job is blameless and upright, i.e., he is complete and balanced, and he turns from evil as soon as he recognizes it. So God asks Satan. "Have you tried Job?" Satan says, "Well, I certainly have tried. I've looked that man over very carefully, and examined how to get at him. but I can't get near. You've got him hedged in, surrounded by protection. I've tried every way I can to get at Job, but you've got him so protected there's no way I can get through."

Two things in particular emerge from this account -- the satanic activity and the satanic philosophy. Satan's activity is going up and down looking for somebody he can get at. This is in line with what Peter tells us. "Your adversary [and here Peter uses the same term, the meaning of the name "Satan"] the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour," (1 Peter 5:8). He goes about seeking those he can get at, to twist and distort and ruin, if he can. Now there is a tremendous helpful picture of some of the forces at work in

every one of our lives. There is a vicious, malicious enemy looking for a chink in our armor.

Remember how, in the letter to the Ephesians, Paul speaks of giving the devil an opportunity. In Chapter 4, Verse 26, Paul says, "Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and [therefore] give no opportunity to the devil."

When do you give the devil an opportunity to get at you? When you hold a grudge, when you get mad at somebody and refuse to forgive him, when you keep nursing your anger and wrath, feeding it all the time, the devil is watching and saying, "Ah, I've got a chance! I'll get him!" The suggestion here is that whoever reflects to some degree the devil's philosophy is available to his attack. The devil's answer to God is, "You've protected Job, and that's why he serves you. But if you take away your protection, he'll curse you right to your face." In other words, Satan's philosophy says that self-serving is the fundamental law of life. "What's in it for me?" is the ultimate question for every human being, Satan says, and nobody will ever deny that. Put them in the right circumstances, where they have to choose between what is best for them and something else, and they will choose for themselves every time, he challenges.

Now whoever begins to reflect that philosophy to any degree becomes open to the devil's activity. So the Lord says to Satan, "Behold, all that he has is in your power; only upon himself do not put forth your hand."

The third fact that emerges in this account is satanic limitation. God has set the boundaries to Satan's activities. But the impressive thing is that although Satan is a rebel, and he would break the rules if he could, there is no suggestion that he even attempts to break forth from this limitation. There is no possible way by which even Satan can violate God's restriction. He has no power to do it and so he abides by the rules. God is totally in control.

Now the rules of the test are clear. Job is going to be stripped of his possessions because Satan's argument is that when they are taken away. Job will deny God right to his face. So God says to Satan, "All right, we'll see. Go at it. He's in your power, but don't touch his body."

The last part of chapter one gives us the terrible results, Verses 13-15:

Now there was a day when his sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother's house; and there came a messenger to Job, and said, "The oxen were plowing and the asses feeding beside them; and the Sabeans fell upon them and took them, and slew the servants with the edge of the sword; and I alone have escaped to tell you." {Job 1:13-15}

Here came the first messenger of doom saying, "Your oxen and asses are all gone. You know the Sabeans, living over the hill? They came in a raid and took them all, and slew the servants, and I am the only one left, and have come to tell you."

Verse 16:

While he was yet speaking, there came another, and said, "The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants, and consumed them; and I alone have escaped to tell you." {Job 1:16 RSV}

Perhaps this fire was some kind of lightning storm. More likely it was a volcanic eruption, in which brimstone and noxious gases sprayed the countryside, and the sheep and all the servants except this one were killed.

Verse 17:

While he was yet speaking, there came another, and said, "The Chaldeans formed three companies, and made a raid upon the camels and took them, and slew the servants with the edge of the sword; and I alone have escaped to tell you." {Job 1:17 RSV}

There went Job's camels, the most prized possessions of the Arab world in terms of animal servitude, taken in

a raid by the Chaldeans.

Verse 18:

While he was yet speaking, there came another, and said, "Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother's house; and behold, a great wind came across the wilderness, and struck the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young people, and they are dead; and I alone have escaped to tell you." {Job 1:18 RSV}

What a terrible day! The next time you get bad news, I hope you will read through this chapter. If you think you have been mistreated, look at this. The malignancy of Satan is revealed in that he struck to the full extent of his permission. He went right to the boundaries that God permitted him, and took away everything Job had. Satan did not ease the load, he did not stretch it out, he gave no time for preparation of heart and mind. One after the other, four times, the hammer fell, and every time Job's heart was crushed. Finally, he lost all his sons and daughters.

In this account we see that Satan is given power over natural forces. Some have misinterpreted this, saying that this is always true of the devil, that he is the one who runs the wind and the waves. But I do not think that is necessarily true. Many of the Psalms speak of God's control and power in the natural world. But I think we must remember here that Satan must always obtain divine permission to use these natural forces for his own ends.

When Jesus stilled the wind on the Sea of Galilee, he rebuked the wind and the waves. Now Jesus was not talking to air and water -- he was talking to the forces that were behind them, the satanic power that was using these forces to stir up a storm. Evidently, judging from this account in the book of Job, Satan had to receive permission from God the Father to bring that storm into being.

Right now we are reading of the terrible destruction of hurricane Anita in the Gulf of Mexico, and we must read of those events in the light of a revelation like this, that Satan, the god of this world, is at times given permission to bring these things about. I know that atheists often use that fact to present Christian teaching about the character of God in the worst possible light. They say, "Your Bible says that your God allows that to happen. What kind of a God have you got?"

I remember years ago reading a parody of the doxology:

Blame God from whom all cyclones blow,
Blame him, all creatures here below.
Blame him, who knocks down church and steeple,
Who sends the floods, and drowns the people.

The trouble with that is that there is a modicum of truth in it. It is God who has allowed it to happen. This is what makes our faith tremble and quail, and we come up with superficial answers to what is happening.

One Christian defense of this is to say, "Well, Satan is a kind of independent agent, and he does what he likes. God has given him areas in which he can operate, and has no control over him." But when you read an account of some public disaster, a great earthquake, a volcanic explosion, or even, as in this case, a raid by one enemy upon another, you must always read it with a realization that though Satan has been the instrument by which that was done, the will of God is also involved in it. Satan has demanded and obtained from God the power to bring that to pass. This is why the book of Job is given to us, to show that there is a far deeper reason why God permits tragedy than the superficial answers that we often give.

This reason will be unfolded as we go on in this book, and we will see that God is not, as Satan would love to have him painted, a cold impersonal God who does not really care for us, and who does not mind submitting us to tortures and indecencies and injustices like this. Rather, as James tells us, God is merciful and compassionate, and out of this book emerges the revelation of the mercy and compassion of God.

Now we see Job's reaction, Verse 20:

Then Job arose, and rent his robe, and shaved his head, and fell upon the ground, and worshipped. {Job 1:20 RSV}

Job did not complain, he did not blame God, he did not get all angry and upset and say, "Why should this happen to me? What have I done that all these things should suddenly come upon me?" As C. S. Lewis once remarked when asked the question, "Why should the righteous suffer?" "Why not?" he replied. "They're the only ones that can handle it."

So Job's response is, Verse 21:

"Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." {Job 1:21b RSV}

That is, "Thank God for the times when I did have these things, and the enjoyment they gave me; the times with my children, and the blessings they brought into my life. Rather than complain about the loss, I recognize God's sovereign right to do with me as he will. If he gives me things, he has the right to take them away. All I can do is say 'Thank you' for having had them as long as I did."

Verse 22:

In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong. {Job 1:22 RSV}

He has won the first round. It is clear that Satan's argument has been answered. Take away the possessions of a man like Job, and he still will not curse God to his face. He still loves God and follows him and serves him, and recognizes God's right. It is a severe test and I wonder how many of us would have passed it? But the test is not over -- there is much worse yet to come. Before this book is through we will see levels of pride in Job of which he was totally unaware. We will begin to see what God is after in Job's life, and in ours, by this kind of testing.

Now you may be saying, "I wonder what's going on behind the scenes about me? I wonder what Satan is saying about me now, and if he's asking permission to get me!" If that is what you are thinking, all I can say is, "Do not worry, live one day at a time." For the thing this book tells us is that, if Satan had his way, every one of us would always be in this kind of difficulty. Satan would wreck us and hurt us and tear us apart all the time if he could -- not because he is angry at us, but because he wants to get at God, whom we serve.

But God's protecting hand has been over us. If we can sit here in any degree of peace and enjoyment it is because the hand of God has been like a hedge about us, protecting us and giving us great and wonderful things. Therefore, the attitude of every human heart ought to be, "Thank God for what I've got! Thank God for where I am now. What the future may hold, only he knows.

And if it holds some kind of testing like this, it is only because, as Paul has reminded us in First Corinthians, "God will not test you above what you are able to bear," {cf, 1 Cor 10:13}.

He knows what you can bear, and he will not put you to the test so severe it must destroy your faith. But there are implications in every test that go far beyond the superficial aspects of the situation. That is what we need to remember. And as this remarkable book unfolds we will see some of the things that God brought to the attention of Job.

Prayer:

Our heavenly Father, we are grateful that we have so much blessing in our lives. How much your hand has given! How much it has poured into our life already, in terms of joy, pleasure, peace, relationship, warmth and love. We can only give thanks, Lord. And rather than complain about what we do not have, Lord, help our hearts to be filled with gratitude for what

we have. Help us to know that your heart of love is watching over us, and protecting us from a vicious and evil being who would destroy us in a second if he could. Make us grateful for that. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: The Test
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: Let God be God: The Book of Job
Scripture: Job 1
Message No: 1
Catalog No: 3540
Date: September 4, 1977

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