

# SATAN CHALLENGES JOB

## Job 1:1-22

(First sermon in a six-part series)

**PENTECOST 6**

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For many years now, we have kept a bird feeder in our back yard, where we can almost reach out and touch the birds from our deck chairs.

The cylinder-shaped feeder was purchased on the promise that it was squirrel-proof.

However, unlike the songbirds who regularly feed there, the enterprising squirrels have figured out how to make it into a feeding trough.

We enjoy feeding and seeing our ‘outdoor’ pets, and feel good about feeding them.

However, from time to time, for one reason or another — vacations, bad weather, forgetfulness — we neglect to fill our feeder.

During times like that, the birds still come to the feeder to feed, and, finding no food, they fly away.

I have wondered if the birds would ever abandon our backyard feeder out of frustration or disappointment.

Or, do they wonder if something they did was responsible for the food being withheld from them?

In reality, they probably come because they have found food there before, and if they don’t happen to find it, they simply fly away to look elsewhere.

That is one of the major differences between humans and other creatures.

We humans are meaning-makers, constantly trying to understand our world in terms of cause and effect.

We desperately want to believe that the world makes sense, that it is a place where things just don’t happen, but happen for a reason.

As difficult as it might be to accept, we want to be told that it was not by accident that a family member was diagnosed with cancer, a child was born with a disability, and a city was destroyed by a hurricane or lava from a volcano.

We are uncomfortable with the thought of living in a randomly unregulated world.

But maybe even more than wanting to be reassured that our world and its natural laws are orderly and predictable, we want very much to believe that it is fair, and that people get what they deserve.

Job's visitors, in the Biblical book to which we will shortly be introduced, struggle mightily, not only to find cause for their friend's suffering, but also to assure themselves that Job's suffering is morally justified.

They would not be consoled to realize that an all-powerful God inflicted it because God does not care about the moral worth of His victims.

Perhaps no area of life raises more questions than the misfortunes that befall us.

A theologian wrote a book-length study of what makes humans unique.

He found that the crucial difference was not in larger brain size, upright posture, opposable thumbs, or even the use of language.

What makes humans unique, he suggested, is our ability to find meaning in suffering.

Unlike the birds in our backyard, who, when they find the feeder empty, fly off to look for food elsewhere, the man or woman who loses a job, is injured in a car crash, or is diagnosed with a malignant tumor feels compelled to ask, "Why did this happen to me?"

And, if no answer is readily available, they will keep looking for an adequate one.

Suffering becomes more bearable if we can give it meaning or purpose.

"What good can come out of this?" we ask.

Is there any place believers can turn where we can understand that this world and our lives in it makes sense, in which everything happens for a reason, not just natural reasons, but moral ones?

How about one that speaks of moral causes for the things that happen to us as inevitable, not only to invoke a Creator God, but also a caring God, who is an active presence in our world and our lives?

In the Bible, there is one book that engages in serious theological conversation about a world where people suffer for no apparent reason.

That book, of course, is Job.

The Book of Job does not identify its author, or indicate the date when it was written.

The story takes place outside of Israel, most likely in the neighboring land of Edom.

The date when it was written has always been debated among scholars.

The Jewish Babylonian Talmud attributes the book to Moses.

The early church father, Eusebius, asserts that it was written around the time of Abraham.

Most experts today place it during the patriarchal age of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

The theme that dominates the entire Book of Job is suffering, which is a common subject discussed by humans in every age.

In the Hebrew Bible, the Book of Job is located in the third section, known as the *Ketuvim*, or miscellaneous writings, which comes after the Torah and the books of the prophets.

The *Ketuvim* contains the major books of Psalms, Proverbs, and Job, the five smaller “scrolls,” and several historical books.

The three major books are referred to as “Books of truth:”

the spiritual truths of the Psalms,

the practical truths of Proverbs,

and the theological insights of Job.

The first thing we need to know about the Book of Job is that there are two of them.

First, there is the Fable of Job, a very old, simple folktale of faith maintained and rewarded in Chapters 1, 2, and 42 of the Biblical book.

And then there is the Poem of Job, a much later and more complicated work, comprising the larger middle sections of the book.

The Poem of Job reveals a Job who is not necessarily steadfast, and who questions God’s compassion and mercy.

In the Fable, Job is never tempted to cry out or express anger toward God.

He tells his wife, “*Should we accept only good from God and not accept evil*” (2:10), whereas the first thing that Job does in the Poem is to curse the unfairness of his fate.

Once upon a time, the Fable begins, there was a man named Job, which in Hebrew means “one whom God treated as an enemy.” Job is a man who “feared God” and is described as “blameless and upright.”

He has been blessed by God with abundant wealth in terms of domestic animals he owns, and a large family of seven sons and three daughters.

His world is complete, and he lacks nothing.

Not only did Job never sin himself, but when he learned that his sons had been partying hardy, he would offer sacrifices on their behalf to cover their sins.

Essentially, Job is a pious, God-fearing Everyone.

Was Job a real person?

Did all these terrible things happen to him?

We are told Job lived in the land of Uz, which was the name of Nahor's oldest son.

The Fable tells us that one day, Satan appeared before God to report on the doings of God's earthly subjects.

God says to Satan,

***“Have you considered my servant Job?***

***There is no one like him on earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil”*** (1:8).

Satan replies, “Well, of course he does good.

You have made it worth his while, rewarding him richly for his piety.”

God insists that Job would be just as faithful, even if all those blessings were taken away from him.

God and Satan enter a wager to test whether this is indeed the case.

Satan send marauding armies to kill Job's servants and steal his livestock.

He sends a tornado to destroy the house in which Job's ten children are celebrating, killing all of them.

***“In all this,”*** we are told, ***“Job did not sin or charge God with wrong-doing”*** (1:22).

God now turns to Satan and says,

“Have you noticed that Job has not been shaken in his faith, despite what you persuaded me to do to him?

Doesn't that prove that he is a person of total integrity?”

Satan counters, “It doesn't prove a thing.

You've only taken property, which can be replaced.

Touch him personally and see how quickly he will turn against you.”

So God afflicts Job with a disease over all of his body, causing him constant pain.

His wife urges him to curse God and be struck dead for it, to be put out of his misery once and for all, but Job rebukes her.

Three friends come to console him in his bereavement and his condition.

Before they can say anything, the tone of the narrative changes from prose to poetry, and Job's quiet acceptance of God's punishment changes to roaring rage against it.

So what wisdom can we glean from what we have heard or read so far?

The adversities we humans experience can come from many sources.

Some result from our own mistakes and choices.

Others are beyond our personal control, such as many health or medical problems, financial difficulties caused by macroeconomic factors, or accidents, like being struck by a car.

The Book of Job suggests that some adversities are rooted in cosmic issues that extend far beyond one's individual responsibility.

Beloved people of God,

Job's initial response to personal calamity and tragedy reflects deep pain, but also unshakeable faith in God.

Faith in God does not mean that we face our pain with a stoic, unfeeling response.

When adversity strikes our lives, we can and should feel the full extent of the pain.

Faith does not deny pain, but rather takes it to the Lord.

For as Job himself will come to learn, adversity can lead us into greater spiritual depth in our knowledge and confidence in God.

AMEN