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The Scandal of the Book of Job

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THE SCANDAL OF THE BOOK OF JOB

**We must face the same questions that Job faced—
and be prepared to embrace the answers.**

God is for us and never against us. And if He is for us, who can be against us? Satan tries through his many inventions to separate us from God, but he is totally unsuccessful with his various activities if we stay in a personal trust relationship with the Lord. Paul assures us that nothing can separate us from the love of God (Rom. 8:35-39).

This truth is evident in a careful reading of the Old Testament Book of Job, which, in the scriptural canon, was probably written first (along with Genesis). It thus provides a preface to the whole of God's revelation, introduces the Pentateuch, and gives significant insight into the Great Controversy.

First, it must be stressed that the Book of Job is not primarily about

Job, but about the God of Job, about who He is. It reveals the characters of the three main protagonists in the book, namely, God, Satan, and Job, but the book is first of all a revelation about our God.

The book opens with a prologue that describes two heavenly scenes of intense controversy between God and Satan (Job 1:6-12; 2:1-7). There was a heavenly assembly before a sovereign Ruler of the universe when the sons of God gathered before Him. Satan, the adversary, "also came among them" (1:6, NKJV).

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The word *also* suggests that he was not a regular member of that group. The immediate context gives the impression that he behaves like the one to whom the Earth belongs: "roaming through the earth and going back and forth in it" (vs. 7). Satan is characterized as an intruder; playing the role of the accuser and the possessor of Planet Earth.

According to Job 1:8; 2:3, God justifies Job in front of the solemn assembly gathered before Him. Twice in these first two chapters, God declares Job to be right, i.e., blameless, upright, fearing God, and shunning evil. His character is without question, but not because he is sinless. Job knows he is a sinner (7:21; 10:6; 14:17); he can be blameless only through God's transforming grace. In these two encounters, which God initiates, God directs His words to Satan, and He engages with him in heightened dialogue.

From the very beginning of this biblical book, God is presented as passionately standing up for Job. But Satan does not share God's loving affection for Job. Instead he involves Job in his argument against God, and his evil devices go to the very root of his dispute with Him.

The Issue in the Great Controversy

Satan does not agree with God pronouncing Job righteous; he opposes His standing on Job's behalf and tackles Him with a frightful,

subtle, and seemingly innocent question: "Does Job fear God for nothing?" (1:9, NIV). This cynical question introduces the theme and the plot of the book. At first glance, it is directed against Job, but in reality it is an attack on God by attempting to disprove His statement about Job. Thus the main theme of the Book of Job is the justice of God. The real drama turns on the fact that He is for us and proclaims us just.

Is God just when He is justifying us? Satan's question expresses his hidden thoughts. To understand Satan's motive, it is necessary to study the key words in the question: "for nothing." The Hebrew term for this occurs four times in the book (1:9; 2:3; 9:17; 22:6). It can be translated also as "gratis," "gratuitously," "without a reason," "for nought," "freely," "disinterestedly," "for no purpose," "in vain," "without cause." Satan's question can be stated thus: Does Job serve God disinterestedly? Is his piety unselfish and devotion wholehearted? Or expressed differently: Does he serve God out of love, i.e., for nothing?

Why is Satan's question—whether Job serves God out of love (whether we serve God out of love)—so evil? Why is it so bad to question our motives? Because in such situations we cannot defend ourselves. Only time (and usually a long period of time) and difficulties of life (problems, persecution, suf-

fering) will reveal who is correct—us or our accuser. Every time people attack the motives of other people, they put themselves on the side of Satan. If someone wishes to hurt you badly, the most effective way he or she can do it is by attacking your motives. In such a situation you are immediately defenseless.

Satan's Claim

Satan has no evidence against Job's actual behavior, but he claims that no one serves God unselfishly because, according to him, that is impossible. He declares that God is surrounded only by hypocritical sycophants who confess their love to the Lord, but who in reality serve Him only because He blesses them. Satan asserts that created beings are not following God because of His goodness, kindness, beauty of character, and personality, but for the many benefits and abundant privileges they receive from Him. They are devoted to Him because He is bribing them. God is not only blessing them now, but even promises them eternal life. Why not, then, serve Him for all these wonderful things?

Satan thus presses God not to speculate about something that does not exist, namely, that people truly love Him. Humans do not worship the Lord for nothing, even if they claim to, but for gain—for selfish reasons. Satan is depicted here as never accepting the possibility that

someone can serve God for His loving kindness, for His sake, for just being God. He denies the existence of unselfish service to God.

Satan's Request

Satan argues that God is surrounded by good actors and actresses. To prove his argument, he demands that God take everything from Job, because only in this way will God see Job's facade crumble: "He will surely curse you to your face" (vs. 11, NIV). Satan requests that God remove His blessings from humans because their real selves will be revealed.

Satan, therefore, charges, "Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land" (vs. 10, NIV). It is as if Satan were saying: "Of course it is easy for Job to serve you, because you give him everything that humans desire!" Interestingly, even Satan has to admit that God blesses His followers, cares for them, loves them, gives them prosperity, and protects them. But of course, he now turns it upside down and tries to use the goodness of God against Him.

The Scandal of the Book

When Satan attacks Job's integrity, God allows him to try Job: "Very well, then, everything he has is in your hands" (vs. 12, NIV). What a

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horrible and incredible statement! This is more than a simple puzzle or a riddle.

Those who believe in a good, loving, just, and all-powerful God have an immense problem with this picture of Him. Believers confess that the Creator and the King of the Universe is the Protector of life, Giver of happiness, Prince of Peace, Intervener into human affairs, and Friend of humans. It seems that Job's is a different kind of God than they know from other parts of biblical revelation. Faith makes no sense, and to some extent it makes the situation even worse.

Why didn't the omnipotent God protect His servant? This is the real scandal in the experience of Job. We would like to see the omnipotent God intervene and immediately silence Satan's accusations and prevent him from harming Job. We wish that God would stop at once the abuse of children, rape of women, concentration camps, murders, suffering, car accidents, plane crashes, collapse of towers, pain, violence, hurricanes, tsunamis . . . People ask the poignant

question in times of tragedies, loss, and war: "Where is God?"

The Book of Job begins with a tension. On the one hand, God is putting a hedge around Job, protecting him from any harm, blessing him so generously that he becomes the Bill Gates of his time. On the other hand, Job is abandoned (for a time) by God to the hands of Satan. There is no logic to this. The situation seems self-contradictory.

We live in a world in which evil reigns, and evil is irrational. Let us not try to find a logical answer to the problem of evil. We need to learn how to live with our unanswered questions. From that angle, the Book of Job is really a quest for God's visible presence in life.

When you lose the most cherished things in your life, what would be your attitude toward God? Will you serve or curse Him? And if you stay with Him, from what motives would you follow Him?

The only answer to questions about suffering is that God was exactly in the same place where He

In the story of Job, only Job himself, who is weaker than the devil, can refute Satan's argument, defeat him, and thus prove that God is right when He is justifying him and standing on his side. Job overcame the devil not because he was so good or strong, but because he totally surrendered his life to God.

was when His Son was murdered at the cross. God is always on the side of the oppressed, suffering person. In our suffering, He suffers. "In all their distress he too was distressed, . . . In his love and mercy he redeemed them" (Isa. 63:9, NIV).

How Can Satan Be Defeated?

All these pertinent, disturbing inquiries go back to the core of the problem: How can Satan be defeated? This question needs to be answered to shed greater light on the whole conflict of the Book of Job and the standpoint of God.

Satan cannot be defeated by logic because against each argument is a counterargument. To refute someone only with facts has no lasting results. If Satan could be defeated through debate, God would have done it a long time ago, for He is the Truth (Ex. 34:6; Deut. 32:4; Ps. 31:5; John 17:17).

Can Satan be defeated by force? Nothing would please him more than to face force in whatever form.

This is exactly what he wants to prove about God. He wants to accuse God of using force, but he lacks evidence; he cannot demonstrate it. Of course, Satan could be silenced by power if God chose to do so. The omnipotent Creator is also the Mighty Warrior (Ex. 15:3; Isa. 42:13; Jer. 20:11). In that case, however, God would be accused of not playing fair and thus having an advantage over Satan. The Great Controversy does need to be won, but in a different way.

If God were to use force to gain victory, Satan would confront Him with defiance: "God, are you not ashamed to beat me who is weaker than you? You won because of power, not because of love or truth."

Satan draws weapons from an evil arsenal: ambition, pride, selfishness, lies, deceit, violence, anger, hatred, prejudice, racism, terrorism, addictions, manipulation. . . Satan can be overcome only by love, truth, justice, freedom, and order. God uses only these pure weapons. Satan,

however, exercises any means and any strategy available.

How often we wonder why our Almighty God allows tragedies to happen in the lives of good people, not knowing or forgetting that Satan can be defeated only by someone who is weaker than he is.

Victory Through Weakness

This is the reason for the incarnation. The God of the whole universe had to become weak in order to defeat evil. Only with the frailties of humanity could He defeat Satan. On the cross of Calvary, the Creator God demonstrated His love, truth, and justice. The suffering God, hanging on the cross, is a victorious God. What a paradox! Sin started with pride, but was overcome by humility (Isa. 14:12-15; Phil. 2:5-11).

In the story of Job, only Job himself, who is weaker than the devil, can refute Satan's argument, defeat him, and thus prove that God is right when He is justifying him and standing on his side. Job overcame the devil not because he was so good or strong (Job 7:21; 10:6; 14:17) but because he totally surrendered his life to God. He did this in full confidence and trust in the God who gave him strength and victory (13:15; 19:25-27; 42:5). Paul says eloquently: "When I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10, NIV).

This is a true paradox of life. When we realize our complete depen-

dence on God, when we humbly admit and accept our frailty, when we trust God and not ourselves and allow Him to work in our lives, victory is ours because He fights for us. We cannot win this battle unless we stay in a close personal relationship with Him. We need to fight a good fight of faith (1 Tim. 6:12), not against sin, but for a close relationship with Christ, who is the only one who can give us victory. He can bring us victory because He is the Victor. He came to Earth with a clear purpose: to save us from sin and not in sin (Matt. 1:21). In Him and because of Him, we are victors, too (Rev. 12:11).

What Was Left When Job Lost Everything?

Paradoxically, even after Job lost everything, seven things remained:

1. His life, though one of misery. In a sense, it would have been easier for Job to die and not to undergo the painful suffering.

But God had set a boundary for Satan: "You must spare his life" (Job 2:6, NIV; compare with 1:12). The good news is that God promises we will never be tested beyond our ability to cope (1 Cor. 10:13). In the controversy between God and Satan, Job's death would not answer the issue under contention. Jesus Christ had to go through the ultimate test of loyalty. When Jesus died, Satan was defeated, and once and for all it was demonstrated that pure love and obe-

dience do exist and are possible. We overcome Satan only because of Jesus' victory (Rev. 12:10, 11).

2. His wife. She advised him: "Curse God and die!" (2:9, NIV) because she loved him. Out of love she gave him bad advice, not realizing that by doing so, she is putting herself on the side of Satan.

3. His friends. When they heard about Job's misery, they immediately came to visit him. When they arrived and saw the tragedy he was enduring, they tore their robes, sat down with him for seven days, and didn't say one word. What an important act of solidarity!

When Job "cursed the day of his birth" (Job 3:1, NIV), his friends could not bear his bold speech. They accused him of self-righteousness. Their false and very simplistic theology bubbled up to the surface (see especially Job 4:6-9), and they rebuked him (8:2-6; 22:3-11). They were miserable comforters (16:2). They were servants of Satan because they only extended the accusations he started. One can say: Where Satan cannot enter, he sends friends.

4. His voice. Job spoke openly but honestly with God. He said things we sometimes think a devoted follower of God should not say. But Job is an example of a man sincerely questing for truth. He wanted to know the truth, the mysteries of life. We need to learn how to dialogue truthfully with God without hiding anything.

At the end of the book, God Himself twice stated that what Job said about Him was correct. His three friends were rebuked (42:7-8). Very often people who say harsh things about God because they have been hurt by the unrighteous, or by the unjust things of life, can be closer to God and to the truth than those who always try to defend God.

5. His mind. To think, to be able to analyze and evaluate, are very important gifts.

6. His God. Job was longing and searching for God's perceptible presence in his life because God was seemingly hidden and far away. The great news is that God is with us in our problems and carries us through them. He suffers with us in our sufferings (Isa. 63:9). He never abandons us, even though it seems very often that He is a faraway God. He gives victory over all kinds of temptations, struggles, problems, and suffering. He is always with His people giving them power to overcome and persevere. Paul states: "I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (Phil. 4:13, NIV).

7. His personal trust in the personal God. Job, with full confidence in his God, whose actions he did not understand, confessed: "Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him; I will surely defend my ways to his face" (Job 13:15, NIV). His personal faith in a personal God triumphed.

Job's relationship with God was

In the darkest situation of life, God revealed Himself to Job as the Creator (chaps. 38–41). This was His answer to Job's suffering. By presenting Himself to Job as the Creator, God declared that He is above all, He is in control, He is the Source of life, He is able to re-create. He is able out of nothing, even chaos, to create something new, valuable, and permanent.

severely tested, but by faith, he clung to God with all his strength. He trusted Him and served unselfishly. Nothing, even pain, suffering, or unanswered questions, could separate him from God. His integrity was vindicated.

Because Job had cultivated a trusting relationship with God in the past and was relying on His promises, he could go through the present crisis victoriously. Past experience with God helped him to survive Satan's savage attack.

Troubles of life, suffering, and persecution have no power to create faith in us, but instead they reveal our faith. Difficulties of life help us to discover what really is inside us, and they may also further develop and strengthen faith (Rom. 8:28). Job himself declares that his relationship with the Lord was deepened: "My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you" (42:5, NIV). Even though he did not understand his existing situation, he completely trusted His God. Job

retained his faith in Him, even though he lost everything, because his confidence was anchored in God, not in the prosperity of life. He preferred to fulfill God's will before his own; he was willing even to die for Him, to lose everything. Job's obedience and faithfulness to God was stronger than his desire to preserve his well-being and happiness. He served God even though God's promises apparently failed.

Final Outcome

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When Job demonstrated that he loved God above all, God's standing for him was vindicated. His justice

prevailed. God is just while justifying us because His grace and presence, even though very often unseen and silent, sustains His people. God demonstrates that He rules in justice. Satan's slander, jibes, and taunts are openly proved to be without any substance. Evidences of Job's life eloquently cry against Satan.

The Book of Job demonstrates that it is possible to serve God for love of Him and not for reward. Devotion to God and human integrity are an expression of love and gratitude to Him for who He is. This devotion and integrity can endure even in times when disasters come and tragedies of life strike and raise questions that cannot be easily answered. Faith triumphs despite the problems of life.

Thus, Job gives a penetrating insight into the key issue of the great controversy between God and Satan, and we need to ask ourselves: Why do we serve God? What are our motives? Everything in our lives depends on our motives, and every deed is judged according to them.

At the end, God rewarded Job even more than in the beginning (42:10-16). Does this prove, therefore, that he nevertheless served God for a final reward? Not at all! God gives rewards; it is His nature. As our good Friend, He blesses us not in order to buy our love, but because He loves us. His faithful followers do not serve Him because of these gifts.

This point was demonstrated clearly in Job's afflictions. After it was proven that he loved God disinterestedly, he received double blessings.

Job's experience is a case in which God answers mysteries and perplexities of our own existence. Job's case is a model that each of us must go through. Though situations of life will be different, Job's experience is our experience. Everyone has to endure trials of life just as Job did. Satan tries, unfortunately often successfully, to separate us from the love of God through his many inventions. We are all engaged in the battle between good and evil.

But in God's hands we are absolutely safe and no one can remove us from His caring arms. We are His sons and daughters. Our identity lies in Him. Paul states in Romans 8:35-39 that absolutely nothing and no one on Earth or in the whole universe can separate us from the love of God, even though Satan is a master in his attempts and intrigues. Of course, this can be true only on the condition that we stay in a close, intimate, and trusting relationship with our loving, holy, and awesome Lord. The Lamb of God has the final word in the cosmic controversy between good and evil: "They will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings" (Rev. 17:14, NIV). Our God is a God of love, truth, and justice. □