

# When the Ground Gives Way

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*Job*

By Dr. Derek Thomas

**Bible Text:** Job 1

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## **First Presbyterian Church**

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*Heavenly Father, as we come into your presence, we are reminded that your word is sharper than any two edged sword, dividing asunder the joints and marrow, the soul and spirit. So come, come Lord Jesus with the sword in your hand and the word of God upon your lips. Do a work in our hearts, we pray, and draw us to yourself for Jesus' sake. Amen.*

Please be seated.

Now, turn with me, if you would, to the book of Job. The reading for this morning is found printed in your bulletin if you don't have your Bible with you. I'm going to embark on a series of expositions that will take us through to the end of November, a dozen or so expositions on the book of Job. I did notice, it was Thursday I think before I realized this, that the title for this morning's sermon is "When the Ground Gives Way," and the title for this evening's sermon by Dr. Davis is, "When the Bottom Falls Out." I'm not sure what that says about us as a congregation, but perhaps we need some more happy pills or something but it wasn't planned that way except that it was in God's divine plan and perhaps, as I was reflecting on it, amused at one level but then on another level, perhaps that's just what our congregation needed to hear today because your lives have fallen apart and trials and tribulations have come and you need the comfort of the word of God to bear you up on eagles' wings.

Let's read together from Job 1.

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. 2 There were born to him seven sons and three daughters. 3 He possessed 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, and 500 female donkeys, and very many servants, so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east. 4 His sons used to go and hold a feast in the house of each one on his day, and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. 5 And when the days of the feast had run their course, Job would send and consecrate 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 children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts." Thus Job did continually.

6 Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them. 7 The LORD said to Satan, "From where have you come?" Satan answered the LORD and said, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." 8 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?" 9 Then Satan answered the LORD and said, "Does Job fear God for no reason? 10 Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. 11 But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face." 12 And the LORD said to Satan, "Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand." So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD.

13 Now there was a day when his sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother's house, 14 and there came a messenger to Job and said, "The oxen were plowing and the donkeys feeding beside them, 15 and the Sabeans fell upon them and took them and struck down the servants with the edge of the sword, and I alone have escaped to tell you." 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." 17 While he was yet speaking, there came another and said, "The Chaldeans formed three groups and made a raid on the camels and took them and struck down the servants with the edge of the sword, and I alone have escaped to tell you." 18 While he was yet speaking, there came another and said, "Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother's house, 19 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." 20 Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. 21 And he said, "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." 22 In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.

In the 17th century, a famous Scottish Presbyterian minister began a series of expositions on Job. His name was George Hutchinson and he preached 316 sermons on Job. About the same time in a congregation in London, a man, a Puritan by the name of Joseph Carroll, his successor John Owen would be more familiar perhaps to you, Joseph Carroll began a series of expositions on the book of Job that took him 23 years to finish. Imagine. You're hearing the opening sermon on Job 1 and you've just baptized your child and he

will be graduated from college before I finish the expositions. Well, I want to embark on something a little more or less ambitious and we want to look at Job, as it were, from 36,000 feet and I hope we'll be done by the end of November.

This is an astonishing book that challenges and captivates because it asks the perennial question, "Why? Why me? Why now? Why so severe? Why not someone else?" And as those questions get asked and there isn't a single soul in this room this morning who hasn't asked that question at some point, in some way, in some capacity. What happens, of course, is that when we ask those questions, we ask questions of God and who he is and the nature of his being and what he has and has not promised. We put God, as it were, in the dock and perhaps for some, he is tried and tested and found wanting.

This prologue is for our benefit. This prologue was not something that Job was familiar with, except the events that befell him, but he knows nothing, for example, of the encounter between Satan and God. That's there for our benefit. But we are given, as it were, a little glimpse behind the scenes. It's as though the curtain of Providence is pulled back just a little bit to allow us to glimpse something in the haze and mists of the purposes and control of God in this world in which you and I live.

There are three characters here in this opening chapter: there is Job and there is Satan, or the Satan, and there is God. There is Job. I believe Job is an historical figure. He is mentioned in Ezekiel 14. He probably lived at the time of Abraham, perhaps a little bit before Abraham; the book comes from a later period of Old Testament history for sure. He comes from a place called Uz in the Arabian desert. He's not an Israelite. He's a representative of humanity. And no sooner is Job introduced to us than he is described in terms of four particular characteristics: he is blameless; he is upright; he fears God; and he turns away from evil. And we're told that three times. We're told it in verse 1 by the author of the book of Job. We are told it again in verse 8 and this time on the lips of Almighty God. Then it's repeated again in the second chapter in verse 3 which we'll look at next week. Blameless, upright, fears God, turns away from evil.

If we had time, and we do not, we could explore that a little. We could ask ourselves the question, "What are the marks, what are the characteristics of godliness? How does God measure godliness?" Well, you could do no better than turn here. What does God look for? When you think of godliness, when you think of Christian maturity, when you think of growth, what do you think of? Well, blamelessness, uprightness, fearing God and turning away from evil. That's a good place to start. The point here is to demonstrate to us that Job was a godly man. He was the godliest man on the face of the globe, apparently.

You see, there are very few people in here, there are some perhaps, but there are very few people in here who would have trouble with the idea that ungodly men, ungodly women suffer. In fact, some of us think they should suffer a little bit more. Some of us think that's what's wrong with our society, that the ungodly are allowed and even encouraged to prosper at the expense of the godly. But the conundrum of this book is that what happens to this man happens to a man who is godly, happens to a man who is the godliest person on the face of the globe. Why? It, of course, will corroborate a plea that Job will make, a

plea of innocence that he doesn't deserve what has come to him. That there is something wrong with the distribution of penalty, with the distribution of suffering and that that something wrong is something wrong in God himself.

Now, some of us might have some misgivings about the concept of innocence here. We're talking here about a concept of legal innocence in the same way that the man born blind in John 9, you remember the man born blind and the disciples come up to Jesus and they say to Jesus, "Who sinned? Was it the boy or was it his parents?" You understand the presupposition behind the question: someone must have sinned; it must either be the boy or his parents and the blindness is God's retribution. It's God's punishment because somebody has sinned. And you remember Jesus' answer? "Neither." That the reason for the suffering of this blind man had nothing to do with him or his parents but lies in the inscrutable mystery of the purposes of Almighty God and that through this suffering God is going to use this man for blessing to fall upon the church, that's basically Jesus' answer and still today we remember this man who otherwise we would not have remembered.

Job is going to plead but he is innocent and Job 1 in the words of the author of the book of Job and more especially in the words of God himself, that plea has justification and merit. God says he's a godly man. God says that. Then one day while the boys or one of the boys was celebrating what looks like a birthday and the family have gathered and there's a party, and I don't think you should read anything into it and those of you who have scruples about drinking wine and so on, don't use this passage. Please don't use this passage to say God killed 10 children because they were drinking. Please don't do that. This is just an explanation that this was a birthday party and they were having fun and they were enjoying themselves and on the face of it Scripture says nothing else about it, that this was all good clean fun. And then suddenly out of nowhere, in one raid after another from Chaldeans and Sabeans and from what we sometimes call Mother Nature, Job loses everything that he has. You know, these camels and sheep and donkeys and oxen and so on, this is his 401(k), you understand. This is his bank balance. These are his savings and investments and stocks and so on and they have been wiped out. They're gone. Some of you know what that means to lose a business and the hopes and dreams and plans that you made for the future and for your children and grandchildren are gone through no fault of your own. And then more especially, to lose 10 children. I don't know anything about this. I can't come to you this morning and say I know how Job felt. I have no idea how Job felt here. I have no idea what it would mean to lose 10 children all in one fell swoop. The devastation of it.

He comes from Uz. Uz could be Columbia. It could be a suburb of New York: Queens, Manhattan, Brooklyn, Long Island, Bronx. Imagine a man, Mister Job, a believer, a godly man, a member of Redeemer Church in New York, let's put him there. I'm making this up in case there's anybody from Redeemer Church. His son works in the World Trade Center, another son works in the Pentagon, a daughter is a flight attendant with American Airlines, and in one hour on a terrible morning in September on the 11th day, he loses all three of his children and they are gone and he turns on the TV and I remember it well, I was preaching in the chapel at RTS in Jackson. I was the preacher that morning and I have a vivid memory of somebody coming up to me into the pulpit and saying, "We have

to pray right now. Something terrible has happened. Something unimaginably tragic has happened." And next week this man, Mister Job, is going to fall ill, desperately ill, and his wife is going to turn against him and she's going to say to him, "How can you be a Christian? How can you respond like this when we've lost all of our children?" And after a period of some silence, his friends are going to start texting him and they're going to start saying little snippy things that imply, "You know, you had it coming. Search yourself. Look into your past somewhere because this is retribution because God is just."

There is Job. We're going to follow him over the next few weeks. We're going to get right down into his heart, into his soul, into areas of darkness that some of you don't want to go to perhaps. There's Job. Then there's Satan, actually technically the Satan, it's more of a title than a name. The adversary. He doesn't appear anywhere else in the book. He doesn't appear in any of Job's friends' contribution. He doesn't appear in anything that Elihu has to say who appears in chapter 32. He doesn't appear in the epilogue, in the explanation of things at the end of the book of Job. He just appears here, at least his name only appears here. What does it say? Well, it says first of all that there is a connection. Without explaining it, without going into the ins and outs of it, without becoming philosophical and overly technical, we can say at least this: that there is a connection between suffering and Satan. We live in a world that is supernatural. We wrestle not against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world. Satan prowls like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. We have to understand that. Things happen and they happen because there is a conflict that you and I can barely see, that you and I are barely aware of, between God and the powers of goodness and the Satan and the powers of darkness and there is a supernatural battle taking place. This is our worldview. This is the Bible's worldview. That's the world in which we live. "Satan has asked for you that he may devour you," Jesus says to Peter. "He has asked for you but I have prayed for you."

There are questions here and folks after the first service asked me questions and do you know what I said to them? I said, "I don't know." Why is Satan reporting to God? "I don't know." Where did this take place? "I don't know." Why is God interested in what Satan is doing? "I don't know." What I do know and what I think I understand here is that Satan does not have ultimate authority. He must report to God. I don't understand that. There are philosophical aspects of that that will baffle me probably for eternity, but there is this one strand of compensation here that Satan is not in full control. Even when he is allowed to do what he does, he is allowed to do so because God grants him that liberty. That raises some other issues, I understand that.

What's the explanation for evil? What's the explanation for bad things that happen? One explanation is natural law. C. S. Lewis talks about this, advocates this in, "The Problem of Pain." Many of you have read the writings of C. S. Lewis, the Oxford philosopher. Richard Swinburne has argued something similar. We live in a universe of natural law. We live in a universe where, take gravity, you know, gravity affects me more as I get older it. It trips me up, catches me unawares and if I trip, I sprain my ankle. If I trip, I graze my knee. It's part of living on the earth. So it has nothing to do with sin, it is part of natural law. It's the way the world is. I put my hand in the fire, it's a good thing because I

feel pain and I withdraw my hand. But there is more than natural law here. This isn't just an act of Mother Nature. This isn't just an act of blind forces over which no one has any control. Things happen, yada yada yada. "Que sera sera, whatever will be, will be. We live in a world of determinism and fatalism so just live with it. Suck it up." No, there is more here because bad things happen because of the Satan and you had better be equipped with the whole armor of God if you're going to withstand him. You had better be equipped with the word of God and the sword of the Spirit and the breastplate of faith and shoes ready for the preparation of the Gospel of peace if you're going to withstand all of his schemes and machinations. What this is saying to us is that we don't live in a dualistic world. There are the forces of good and there are the forces of evil and the two are equal and we have no idea what the outcome is going to be.

Who did this? Who did this? Well, in one sense forces of nature did it. A fire fell from heaven. A wind blew from the desert. It was a hurricane or a tornado or a bolt of lightning, some such thing. In one respect, it was men who did it. It was Sabeans and Chaldeans who did it. In another respect, it was Satan who did it. Ah, yes, all of that is true. Nature did it. Man did it. Satan did it. And God did it. And God did it. Who gave Satan permission to do what he did and set a boundary that he wasn't to touch Job? That boundary is going to shift in the second chapter. It was God. There's the problem, you see, there's the conundrum. God is in this. My God, my Savior, Jesus is in this. There's a problem of pain. I'll tell you, it's not so much the problem of pain, it's the problem, well, can I say it? It's a problem of God, isn't it?

Does God stand the test of this trial? In verse 21, you have some of the most beautiful and extraordinary words anywhere in the Bible, "The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD." I have met chaplains, we're not talking about chaplains who are here, we're not talking about you dear people, but I have met chaplains. They belong to the "Society for the Protection of Cruelty to God" because they're always saying, "Don't blame God for this." No matter what it is, no matter what circumstance, no matter what trial, no matter what difficulty, they have this burden, "Don't blame God for this. God wasn't in this. God had his hands tied. He wasn't there." I understand why they're saying that. I do understand why they're saying that. Events like this, losses of this magnitude, trials of this severity, can rob you of your faith.

We know people, I know people, who have lost their faith, who have grown bitter and angry because of something that happened 30 years ago, 40 years ago. They have never forgiven God for it. Is that where you are this morning? My dear friend, is that where you are this morning secretly? You bear a grudge against God. Your life isn't where you think it ought to be. Your family hasn't turned out the way you wanted them to be. The circumstances that you dreamt of, there are little dreams that you had about how life would be and all of the twists and turns and it hasn't turned out like that and you blame God. You justify not reading the Scriptures perhaps. You justify not going to church. You justify not singing with any degree of enthusiasm because you're angry and bitter. That's what this does to people, they lose faith. "What kind of God would do something like this?" That's how apostasy begins, my friend. That's how it begins. "If God is big, why

doesn't he stop it? Why doesn't he prevent it? I can't believe in a God who does fill in the blank."

What an extraordinary response Job gives. How would you respond? You don't know. You don't know. No you don't. Let me ask a different question: how do you want to respond? Like Job. Right answer. Yes, like Job. You understand that those who don't believe in the total sovereignty of God think that Job is wrong here, you understand that, and I want to say to you this morning that Job was never more right than when he responded in the way that he did, "The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away." Are there other levels of explanation? Yes! Nature did it. Man did it. Satan did it. But God did it too in a way and in a manner that frees him from the taint of sin. Thomas Watson put it like this, "God always has a hand in the action where sin occurs but he never has a hand in the sin of that action that occurs." Now, there's something to think about.

James Robertson's biography of Stonewall Jackson contains a beautiful and a moving account of an experience that he went through when he was 30 years of age and he lost his wife and son. It was a Sunday afternoon, October 22 in 1854 and his wife, Ellie, went into labor and the child was stillborn and about an hour later she began to hemorrhage and then she died very quickly. He writes to his sister, Laura, who is not a believer, "I have been called to pass through the deep waters of affliction but all has been satisfied. The Lord gives and the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord. It is his will that my dear wife and child should no longer abide with me and as it is his holy will, I am perfectly reconciled to the sad bereavement though I deeply mourn my loss. My dearest Ellie breathed her last on Sunday evening, the same day on which the child was born dead. Oh, the consolations of religion. I can willingly submit to anything if God strengthens me. Oh, my sister, would that you could have him for your God." Do you hear him? In all of his pain he is reaching out to his sister and saying, "Believe and trust in this God. Though all nature to me is eclipsed, yet I have joy in knowing that God withholds no good things from them that love and keep his commandments and he will overrule this sad, sad bereavement for good."

A few weeks later he writes to her again. "She has now gone on a glorious visit through a gloomy portal. I look forward with delight to the day when I shall join her. Religion is all that I desire it to be. I am reconciled to my loss and have joy in hope of a future reunion when the wicked cease from trembling and the weary are at rest." Well, there it is. That's another man's response to tragedy and darkness and trial and difficulty and that's where you want to be, isn't it, if such a thing would happen? If such circumstances befell me, that's what I want my response to be too, isn't it? The Lord gave. The Lord, for reasons that I do not understand or comprehend, the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord. I trust him still.

*Father, as we begin this journey through the book of Job and into areas of great darkness, we thank you for this response from your servant and pray that if ever we or our friends find themselves in similar circumstances and we do not wish it and we do not ask for it, but your ways are not our ways and your thoughts are not our thoughts and we pray that if it is your inscrutable will that we find ourselves in such places, grant us the*

*grace to be able to say with Job, "Blessed be the name of the LORD." For Jesus' sake we ask it. Amen.*