

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, October 23, 2011**

WHEN IT IS HARD TO WORSHIP

Job 1:1-21

INTRODUCTION: WORSHIP AND GRACE

I've been talking the last two weeks about the connection between worship and grace, about worship as a means of grace and worship as a response to grace – the response of a grateful heart to the gift of God's grace, which comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it, and never will. Like me. And you.

Two weeks ago we looked at the testimony of Isaiah, who was given a vision of heaven in which he saw the Lord in the full splendor of His glory and majesty and holiness. Convicted of his unholiness and despairing of any hope in his own goodness, Isaiah received mercy and grace. Though he did not deserve it and never could, he received forgiveness from God, and a new relationship with God. It was all by grace.

Last Sunday we looked at Psalm 95, with its impassioned invitation to make worship priority one in our lives, along with instructions on how to worship God, reminders of why we are to worship Him, and a warning against becoming hardhearted or apathetic toward God.

Today I want you to think with me about those times in life when it may be hard to worship, because life is hard. Because of the hardships, the heartaches, the disappointments and setbacks, the pain and loss, the troubles and tragedies that happen in life. Job can relate. His name, as Eugene Peterson says, is synonymous with suffering. Let's look together at what the Bible says about him in Job 1, and give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

WHEN BAD THINGS HAPPENED TO JOB

If you are hoping for a definitive answer, or *the* definitive answer, to the problem of suffering in the world, you are going to be disappointed today. I don't have a satisfactory answer, except to say that God is the answer, and in His sovereign wisdom and power and love, He allows what He allows in accord with His eternal purposes. He says to us: "I am God, and you are not. Trust me. Trust me with all your heart. My grace is sufficient for you. And always will be."

If you are hoping for a detailed explanation of the relationship and dialogue between Satan and God here in Job 1, and continuing in chapter 2, sorry. That is not the focus of this message. But let's make sure we understand that God and Satan are not equals. Satan is not God's equal. God is sovereign and Satan is not. Satan's power is limited. He can do only what God allows him to do. And Satan will not defeat God. Satan cannot thwart the plans and purposes of God. Why God allows what He allows remains a mystery, which calls for the response of trusting faith in Him. When life is good. And when life is hard.

I do want you to look with me at Job and his response when, seemingly out of nowhere, wave after wave of tragedy and loss and pain came crashing in on him, prompting his wife, in chapter 2, to urge him to “curse God and die” (2:9). Job refused to follow her advice. But countless men and women down through the ages have instinctively blamed God, cursed God, and held Him responsible for their suffering when their world came crashing down. Lots and lots of people still do it today. Job, though, responded in a different way.

I don't know if this is true for you, but in a lot of ways I wish I were more like Job. Seriously. Job was a good man. In the words of *The Message*, Job was “honest inside and out, a man of his word, who was totally devoted to God and hated evil with a passion.” He loved his wife and ten children. And, of course, he was a wealthy man. He was the wealthiest man around. But he was also generous and cared about others. If they had taken a poll to determine the most admired man in the land of Uz, Job would have won in a landslide. You see, in my life I'd like to have more of the qualities Job exhibited in his life. Without the pain and suffering, that is.

As you can see, Job's godliness, integrity and devotion to God did not make him immune to suffering. Sometimes we make the mistake of thinking that if we are living for God, if we are serving Christ, if we are pursuing God's will in our lives, bad things shouldn't happen to us. When you look at Job, you have to conclude that if suffering is designed to be a punishment for evil or doing wrong, Job would not be a likely candidate. You wouldn't expect a good man like Job to suffer the way he did. But, as Randy Alcorn writes in his book *If God Is Good*, trusting in God does not ward off all evil and suffering in life. God never said it would.

In the course of one “terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day,” Job's whole world was shattered to pieces. He lost his livestock to invaders. He lost his sheep to lightning. He lost his camels to Chaldean raiders. Almost all his servants were killed, too. All his possessions, gone in a single afternoon. Worst of all, his ten children, seven sons and three daughters – were all tragically killed when a tornado caused the house of the oldest brother to collapse on them all. Two of these calamities were caused by evil men, Sabeen invaders and Chaldean raiders. The other two were caused by what we call “acts of God” – the lightning that ignited the fire which killed the sheep, and the tornado that destroyed the house and killed all of Job's children.

You would think that would have been enough, or more than enough, tragedy and loss for anyone to have to endure. But there was still more to come. In chapter 2 we find that Satan receives permission from God to afflict Job physically with pain and suffering. Don't ask me why. I don't know why. I only know that in the mystery of His providence, God allows Satan to inflict what seems like unbearable pain on Job. He is covered with painful sores full of infection from the top of his head to the bottom of his feet. It is too much for Job's wife. She can't take any more. And so, as we have already noted, she counsels her husband to curse God and be done with this life. I don't know for sure, but I think she may have said this not so much out of anger, but out of a sense of total despair and hopelessness.

What I find most amazing in all of this is how Job reacted when all these tragedies struck, and he was stripped of just about everything he valued in life. He did not lash out in anger against God. He did not complain about the unfairness of it all. He did not protest that he deserved not suffering but blessing from God because he was such a virtuous man. Though he was crushed by these calamities (as any of us would be), though his life as he had known it was completely shattered, his first response was to worship God. In the wake of his unfathomable loss, Job responded with both grief, as seen in the acts of tearing his robe and shaving his head, and abiding trust in the Lord, expressed in the act of worship. When he was told about everything that had happened to his family and his fortune, “he fell to the ground in worship” (1:20). If you were to ask Job, “What do you do when you’ve lost everything?” I think he would answer, “You worship God. You praise God in the midst of your loss. You keep on trusting God.”

He gave this famous testimony of trust and praise in verse 21:

Naked I came from my mother’s womb,
and naked I will return.
The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away;
the name of the LORD is to be praised.

Life in this world is full of tragedies. It is full of suffering, isn’t it? It is full of heartaches and disappointment. And none of us is immune to it. Life is difficult for a lot of people in a lot of places around the world today. (How is that for an understatement?) And, in different ways, life is difficult for many of us. Or for somebody we know and care about. Probably lots of somebodies we know and care about. You may even feel like what you’re going through is comparable to what Job experienced, on some level. And worshiping God may be just about the last thing you feel like doing.

Job had spent much of his life “in the land that is plentiful, where the streams of abundance flow.” It is not hard to worship there – although in our abundance of material blessings, there is the danger of forgetting the One from whom all blessings flow and our need of Him. It is not so easy to sing songs of praise to God when you’re “on the road marked with suffering, and there’s pain in the offering.” That is where Job found himself, suddenly and without warning. He did not understand why it was happening. He did not understand why God allowed it or ordained it. He did not understand God’s purpose for his suffering. But he worshiped anyway.

Why? Because Job knew that God is worthy. He knew that there is never a time when it is not time to worship God. Never a time.

HOLDING ON TO HOPE

Years ago I read a remarkable little book called *Holding on to Hope* , which tells the moving story of a couple’s journey through the dark valley of suffering and grief in the loss of not one but two precious children to a rare, deadly disease, and how their hope in God and His sovereign goodness sustained them. Nancy Guthrie writes with amazing transparency about

the pain she and her husband experienced and the lessons learned in the midst of it. From the perspective of their deep loss, she has this to say about worship:

“It is one thing to go to church; it is another thing to worship. To be honest, sometimes I just don’t feel like it. Sometimes I just don’t feel like praising and adoring God for who He is and what He has done, which is the essence of worship. To offer up thanksgiving and praise to Him sometimes feels dishonest or insincere.

“That’s why I am so amazed when I consider the story of Job... As Job responds to calamity in his life, he falls to the ground before God in worship. Do you find that an odd response? He has just lost everything (literally), and yet he falls to the ground to worship God. When I read that I wonder, how could he do that?

“Only a person who understands the greatness of God could worship at such a time.... Even though Job feels crushed, perhaps even betrayed, he does what he knows is right. He worships Almighty God.

“Job obviously knew how to worship. He didn’t have to go to the temple. His faith was so genuine and permeated his life so completely that he recognized he could worship God right where he was, just as he was. For Job, worship was a way of life.

“When our skin is pricked by a thorn, what comes out is what’s inside: blood. When our lives are pricked by difficulty, what comes out is what’s inside. For some of us, it is selfishness, pride, bitterness and anger that come seeping out. For others, it is the fruit of the Spirit” – such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). “What came out when Job was not just pricked, but pierced, was worship.

“Often, worship is a matter of obedience. At least it is for me. But ... when I make the choice to be obedient, God changes my feelings, and I come to the place of passionate worship.

“You see, we worship because God is worthy, not necessarily because we ‘feel’ like it. In the midst of a crisis, if we only do what we feel like doing, we could remain stuck in a cycle of self-pity. But when we worship, we get our eyes off ourselves and our sorrow or problems. We focus them on God, and this puts our difficulties into proper perspective.

“Most of us think of worship as a Sunday morning activity in which we gather in a church, sing some songs, and listen to a preacher. Genuine worship, though, is when what flows out of our lips and out of our lives are words and works that glorify God and honor Him for who He is and what He has done. We worship when we reflect His glory – His character and likeness – to others in the way we live. And doesn’t it seem that everyone around us is watching especially closely when tragedy strikes in our lives?

“Surely our worship in the midst of pain and sorrow is particularly precious to God – because it costs us so much. Worship is not made easier, but it becomes all the more meaningful when offered from a heart that is hurting.

“The truth is, worship during these times can be some of the most meaningful worship we ever experience. Perhaps we are more fully equipped to worship than ever before because we are acutely aware of our desperate need for God and our own incapacitating weakness. We have our helplessness and inadequacy in proper perspective to God’s power and sufficiency.” (Nancy Guthrie, *Holding on to Hope*, pp. 16-19).

That is a powerful testimony, isn’t it? It is a testimony borne of great sorrow and loss, and of a deep-rooted trust in the greatness of God and His grace, and the conviction that nothing in the whole universe – not even death – can separate us from the love of God that is in Jesus Christ our Lord (Romans 8:39).

When it is hard to worship, God is still worthy. His worth-ship will never change. So, let us worship Him in every way we can with everything we’ve got. Even when it is hard.

Lord, let it be so in us, now, and always. Amen.