

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Wednesday, November 25, 2009
Thanksgiving Eve**

GIVING THANKS WHEN YOU'VE LOST IT ALL

Job 1:1-21

Do you know what I'm thankful for this Thanksgiving? I'm thankful I'm not Job. I'm thankful that I have not had to endure the onslaught of suffering and loss Job experienced.

In a lot of ways I wish I were more like Job. Job was a good man. Job was a righteous man (which is to say, he was in a right relationship to God). He was a man of integrity and godly character. He was a man who loved his family. He was also a wealthy man, but he had the wisdom to hold his possessions loosely. And he was respected and revered by others. If there had been a poll to determine the most admired man in the land of Uz, Job would have won hands down. I'd like to have in my life more of the qualities Job exhibited in his. Without the pain and suffering, of course.

Job's godliness did not make him immune to suffering. Sometimes we make the mistake of thinking that if we're living for God, if we're serving Christ, if we are pursuing God's will in our lives, bad things shouldn't happen to us. If you look at Job's life, you have to conclude that if suffering is intended as a punishment for evil, 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 God doesn't ward off all evil and suffering in life. And God never said it would.

In the course of a single day, Job's world was shattered. He lost all his livestock to invading Sabeans. He lost his sheep to lightning. He lost his camels to Chaldean raiders. He lost almost all his servants, too. All his possessions, gone in a single afternoon. Worst of all, his ten children – seven sons and three daughters – were all killed when a tornado caused the house of the oldest brother to collapse on them. Two of these calamities were caused by evil men – the Sabeans and the Chaldeans. The other two were caused by what we would call “acts of God” – the lightning which ignited the fire that consumed the sheep, and the tornado which destroyed the house and killed all of Job's children.

What is amazing in all of this is Job's reaction. Did he lash out in anger against God? Did he complain about the unfairness of it all? Did he argue that he deserved not suffering but blessing from God because he was such a good person? No. Though he was crushed by these calamities, though his heart was stabbed with pain, Job's response, as we see in verse 20, was to worship. When he had heard all this news, the Bible says, “He fell to the ground and worshiped.” Worship was his natural response. He praised God in the midst of his loss. Notice Job's famous expression of trust and praise in verse 21:

Naked I came from my mother's womb,
And naked I shall return.

The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away;
 May the name of the LORD be praised.

You would think that the suffering and loss Job experienced in chapter 1 would have been enough. But, as you know, there was more to come. In chapter 2, Satan – our archenemy who is out to destroy our faith and devour our souls – receives permission from God to cause Job to suffer physically. In the mystery of His wise providence, God permits Satan to inflict what seems like unbearable pain upon Job. From the top of his head to the bottom of his feet, Job is covered with painful sores full of pus. Job’s wife has reached the breaking point. It has become too much for her to handle. She urges her husband to curse God and die (verse 9). But Job refuses. He says to his wife: “Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?” (verse 10).

It is a good question, don’t you think? Should we expect and accept only good things from God, and complain or protest – or even worse, curse God – when bad things come into our lives? Isn’t that the way a lot of people think – and live?

Sometimes it is easy to trust God. Sometimes it is easy to praise God. Sometimes it is easy to give thanks to God.

It is easy to give thanks when Providence is smiling down upon us and life is good.

In the words of one of the songs we sang this evening:

It is easy to give thanks “in the land that is plentiful,
 where the streams of abundance flow.”

It is easy to praise God “when the sun’s shining down on (you),
 when the world’s all as it should be.”

But it is not so easy “when (you’re) found in the desert place,
 when (you) walk through the wilderness.”

It is not so easy “on the road marked with suffering,
 (when) there’s pain in the offering.”

You may find yourself in some kind of desert place today. You may be traveling down a road marked with suffering. It is not easy in circumstances like these, is it? But it is still possible. At times, when life is hard, we may feel like just cursing God. We may even wish we could just end it all. But we learn from Job that it is still possible, and it is always good and right, to bless and praise and give thanks to the Lord.

Sometimes, for purposes which may at some point be obvious, or for reasons we may never know, God allows – or even sends – trouble and hardship, pain and suffering, into our lives. Will you accept only good from God’s hand, and not trouble?

We live in troubled, turbulent times, don't we? Everywhere you turn, it seems like there is trouble. More than 16 million Americans who want to work are unemployed. In Michigan, the unemployment rate is around 15 percent. The economy is still sputtering, and our national debt is increasing at a frightening speed. There is the war in Afghanistan, a fragile peace in Iraq, the specter of terrorism, the mass shootings at Fort Hood, and political battles over health care. For some of us, it gets personal as we deal with unemployment, the financial squeeze, family problems, marriage problems, divorce, the loss of a loved one, cancer or some other disease. Some of us have seen our retirement savings swept away. It may be that, like Job, you've had to absorb one blow after another.

How in the world can you give thanks when it seems like you're losing it all? How can you give thanks when it feels like you've lost more than you can bear? How can you say, as Job did, "The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD"? (Job 1:21). These are not easy questions.

You may know about the tragedy experienced by Christian recording artist Steven Curtis Chapman and his family about 18 months ago (May 2008). Chapman's five-year-old adopted daughter Maria was struck and killed by Chapman's 17-year-old son as he was backing the family SUV out of their driveway. The grief of losing a child, along with the feelings of guilt with which the 17-year-old must have wrestled, would have made this situation almost unbearable. But the Chapmans found a way. The first song Steven Curtis Chapman sang in public was the song we sang this evening: "Blessed Be Your Name," with its acknowledgement from the Book of Job that the Lord "gives and takes away."

After his daughter's death, Chapman took time to reconsider the words to all his songs and whether he could still sing – or believe – them. What he found was that his daughter's death brought the meaning of some of those songs into sharper focus. One example is a song called "Yours," which speaks of how everything in the world belongs to God. Listen to the words of this song:

I walk the streets of London (could be Washington)
 And notice in the faces passing by
 Something that makes me stop and listen
 My heart grows heavy with the cry

Where is the hope for London (Washington)?
 You whisper and my heart begins to soar
 As I'm reminded that every street in London is Yours
 Oh, yes it is

I walk the dirt roads of Uganda
 I see the scars that war has left behind
 Hope like the sun is fading
 They're waiting for a cure no one can find

And I hear children's voices singing
 Of a God who heals and rescues and restores
 And I'm reminded that every child in Africa is Yours

And it's all Yours, God, Yours, God
 Everything is Yours
 From the stars in the sky
 To the depths of the ocean floor
 And it's all Yours, God, Yours, God
 Everything is Yours

You're the Maker and Keeper, Father and Ruler of everything
 It's all Yours
 And I walk the sidewalks of Nashville
 Like Singapore, Manila and Shanghai
 I rush by the beggar's hand and the wealthy man
 And everywhere I look I realize

That just like the streets of London
 For every man and woman, boy and girl
 All of creation
 This is our Father's world

And it's all Yours, God, Yours, God
 Everything is Yours
 From the stars in the sky
 To the depths of the ocean floor
 And it's all Yours, God, Yours, God
 Everything is Yours
 All the greatness and power, the glory and splendor and majesty
 Everything is Yours
 We are Yours

It's all Yours, God
 My life is Yours, my heart is Yours
 My hands and feet are Yours
 Every song that I sing
 It's all Yours
 Our gifts are Yours, God
 All our dreams are Yours, God
 All our plans are Yours, God
 The whole earth is Yours, God
 Everything is Yours

After his daughter Maria's tragic death, Chapman wrote a new verse to add to the song:

I've walked the valley of death's shadow
 So deep and dark I could barely breathe
 I've had to let go of more than I could bear and
 I've questioned everything that I believe
 Still even here in this great darkness
 A comfort and a hope come breaking through
 As I can say in life or death
 God we belong to You

In his loss, in his pain and sorrow, Steven Curtis Chapman was saying essentially the same thing Job said: In life and in death we belong to God. Everything belongs to God. And God is sovereign in good times and bad, in prosperity and poverty, in joy and in sorrow, in times of celebration and in times of calamity. So, whatever comes, we trust in the Lord and we say, "Blessed be the name of the Lord."

Thankfulness does not come naturally to many of us. Perhaps that is why we are commanded in the Bible to give thanks. It is not a suggestion. It is not something to do just when you feel like it. It is a command. It is not dependent on either our feelings or our circumstances. The Bible is explicit about this. 1 Thessalonians 5:18 says: "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."

In all circumstances. Whatever God sends. Whatever God allows. This command to give thanks, which is repeated over and over in the Bible, applies to Job in the extremity of his suffering and loss as much as it applies to us. And it applies to you and me in the stresses and strains and pain and suffering of our lives here in northern Virginia just as much as it applies to Job in his.

The key to thankfulness is not our circumstances. The key to thankfulness is in your heart. Brennan Manning says that the key is being aware of God's love for you. He says that when you are aware of the depth of God's love for you, it will make you spontaneously grateful. Cries of thankfulness will become the dominant characteristic of your interior life. And the by-product of gratitude is joy. We are not joyful and then become grateful, he says. We are grateful – thankful – and that makes us joyful.

When someone asks me how I'm doing, these days, I will sometimes answer: "I'm blessed, and I'm grateful." The truth is, I *am* blessed, and even though there are some hard places in my life, especially with my health, I have much for which to be grateful. I am *blessed*, and I am *grateful*. Let me encourage you to try out this response. It can be a positive witness to others, and a healthy reminder to yourself.

Job, of course, is a model of how to handle suffering with reverence and grace. Except for the suffering of Jesus our Savior, the life of Job is the ultimate biblical example. His life is also a model of thankfulness and trust in hard times. Whether the Lord gives or the Lord takes away, one thing is sure: The name of the Lord is to be praised.

May it be so in your life and mine, to the glory of Your name. Amen.