

In one sense the whole book of Job is an exposition of suffering showing us how to suffer well, and who better to draft this exposé for us than a man like Job, who suffered immensely. Because no matter what we think of God's motive, God Himself allowed Job to suffer in the most extreme ways possible. God permitted Satan to take everything from Job: his vitality, his progeny, his property. Job's life went from good to bad and then bad to worst almost instantly. Not months, not weeks, but over the course of just one day, his livestock, his servants, and his ten children all died from various catastrophes and calamities, and he himself was afflicted with horrible skin sores. Everything he loved was taken. His hopes and dreams, gone; his home, ruined; his body, broken till all that remained were his thoughts, but even these were torturous to him. To walk in his shoes would be inadvisable, so the next best thing would be to attempt, in some vicarious way, to share in his experience. Pared of every stray branch, what does the tree of life look like? When everything has been taken from you except the air you breathe, what remains? Quite a lot, actually. For we are more than the sum of our possessions, more than the sum of our earthly relations; we are more than our circumstances, our thoughts, our feelings. And this "something" else, which defines us, is resilient and strong and lasting. But most of us never get a chance to experience this 'otherness' because we live in fear of precisely what happened to Job. And to keep this fear from ever being realized, we barricade ourselves behind the walls of our material securities. We insulate ourselves against every eventuality in the hopes of never experiencing a fraction of what Job experienced.

But this is a delusion on our part. How delusional we are to think we can escape pain and suffering. So, this just might be the most important lesson we learn from Job because the hard truth is that what happened to Job in one day happens to us over the course of our lifetimes. Think about it. No matter how many safeguards we put in place, friends come and go, loved ones die, accomplishments are forgotten, material goods collect dust and decay, bodies grow old, get sick and die. When spread out over a lifetime, we suffer just as much as Job. His suffering was unique in that it was a concentrated dose, ours is more slow release, but the effects are just the same. Everything he endured we too will have to endure at some point or other. It's best we start thinking about such things now lest life catch us unawares. For the only weapon against the inevitabilities of life is not denial or prevention but perspective. Isn't this why we pray? To be mindful and think about the meaning of life, and gain God's perspective on our life. And the meaning of life God reveals is beyond what we could ever rationally

discover on our own. We cling to life because we are terrified of the alternative. We are all scared of death, but more than that, we are scared of dying, of being forgotten, of being a failure, of being a nobody. But in our clinging to life, we do away with the very things that make life worth living. Gone is the boldness to get out there with some godly passion. Gone is the courage to risk it all and live by our convictions. Gone is the adventurous spirit to explore God's wonders until all that remains is this apathy, this boredom, this sterility, and if we are going to live like this, well, we might as well be dead already. So, God's speech to Job this morning is exactly what we need to hear. For it is a reminder that this life has meaning, but not the meaning we ourselves provide. God Himself knows the meaning, not us. God never promised us that our lives would go according to our plan only that they would go according to His. God never promised we wouldn't walk alone in this world, only that He Himself would never leave us or forsake us. And when we are tempted to put God on trial for this unfairness, it's best we remember the dialogue of Job. God's admonition applies to us. We too were not there when God laid the foundations of the earth and created the parameters of life, so who are we to question God or darken His counsel with words without wisdom. And if God alone holds the purpose, then we must go the hard way to find it. Most take the easy way, look for the shortcuts, cheat their way through life, but we must go another way. Only by taking the hard way can we ever hope to find meaning behind suffering because sometimes it takes suffering to learn what we need to learn; to learn what we could never learn otherwise. Sometimes the only way to think decently is to suffer for clarity is found in resistance, and understanding in hardship. And if you can't accept this message then the death of Christ will always be offensive. For what else is Christianity than the belief that there is redemption through suffering. Our very salvation depends on seeing in the death of Christ the life of the world.

We will never know the mind of God, but that shouldn't keep us from waiting on God with Job-like patience and accepting His will with Job-like perseverance. Patience and perseverance laid up against the hard knocks of life. Because whether we like it or not, in the hands of God suffering becomes the messenger of truth and the liberator of the Spirit. And if it's any consolation, we are stronger than we think. We can live with suffering, even much suffering, but what we can't live with is meaningless suffering, suffering for no reason at all. And the book of Job assures us that there is no such thing. Amen.