

The Book of Job:
A Window into a World
of Suffering and Faith, #2

The Cynic's Taunt
Job 1-2

--CEFC 1/14/17

If I could choose one word to sum up our current cultural climate,
it would be this: cynical.

Sunny optimism is out;
cloudy pessimism is in.

Cynicism—that disposition of disbelief in the sincerity or goodness
of all human motives and actions—
cynicism is the new norm.

In part, this climate change can be attributed to the postmodern turn
in the second half of the last century.

We have experienced a significant cooling
of our modern confidence in human reason and scientific discovery
to solve all our problems.

The Enlightenment foundation,
which seemed so firm around 1900,
has crumbled after two world wars,
two atomic bombs,
Vietnam and Watergate,
and the civil rights struggles of the 60s.

Try as he might, the sunny optimism of Ronald Reagan just couldn't prevail.
The disillusionment that took place,
both intellectually and culturally,
has given rise to an new age of doubt and distrust.
We live in an increasingly cynical age./

Random House Dictionary defines “cynicism” as
a “distrusting, disbelieving, contemptuous, attitude,
which holds a low opinion of mankind.”
It leave a person with that “habitual disposition to look on the dark side of things
and to believe the worst will happen.”

Joseph Brodsky, Nobel prize winning poet, expressed his cynicism this way,
“Life—the way it really is—is a battle not between good and bad,
but between bad and worse.”

Or I think of the words of Chicago journalist Mike Royko—
“Show me somebody who is always smiling, always cheerful, always optimistic,
and I will show you somebody who hasn't the faintest idea

what the heck is really going on."

The Cynic's Dictionary, gives this description—

A cynic is "An idealist whose rose-colored glasses have been removed,
snapped in two and stomped into the ground,
immediately improving his vision."

Cynicism begins with a wry assurance that everyone has an angle.

Behind every silver lining is a cloud.

The cynic is always observing, critiquing,
but never engaging, loving, and hoping.

You see this cynical mood in so much of today's comedy,

characterized by satire and parody,

made popular a generation ago now by the likes of Bart Simpson
and David Letterman,

And it has continued with such well known names as

Bill Maher and Jon Stewart.

They gave us humor with a smirk instead of smile.

Journalists today are bred to be suspicious of everyone,

and their motto is always, "Follow the money,"

or "Expect the worst and you will probably find it."

In the universities, literary critics constantly engage in "deconstructing" texts,

seeking the author's hidden agenda,

and those underlying power dynamics that lie behind the words.

Claims to truth are viewed as mere instruments of manipulation,

assertions of one's power over others.

And then there's religion—

religion is especially vulnerable for this cynical onslaught.

It's the common view that all religious people are hypocrites at heart.

That's the narrative that gets reinforced in the media whenever possible.

Ambrose Bierce once defined a Saint as "A dead sinner revised and edited."

In his 2008 documentary film *Religulous*

Bill Maher doesn't hide his own disdain for religion--

"The irony of religion," he says,

"is that because of its power to divert man to destructive courses,
the world could actually come to an end.

The plain fact is, religion must die for mankind to live."

This cynicism is clear and undisguised in the attack of the "new atheists."

Christopher Hitchens book title says it all:

god Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything,

And I think of Richard Dawkins's cynical contempt in his book, *The God Delusion*--

"The God of the Old Testament," he says,
 "is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction:
 [He is] jealous and proud of it;
 a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak;
 a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser;
 a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal,
 pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully."¹

So there!

He says, "The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect
 if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good,
 nothing but blind, pitiless indifference."²

That's cynicism.

Cynicism, in its essence, is a denial of the good, the true and the beautiful;
 that's why it is ultimately a denial of God.

A character in a Robert Louis Stevenson story makes a most perceptive observation—
 "I hate cynicism a great deal worse than I do the devil,
 unless, perhaps, the two were the same thing?"³

That's why I call the central question posed by the Book of Job,
 "The Cynic's Taunt:"
 It is the question given by the Satanic accuser--
"Does Job fear God for nothing?"
 In other words, is there really such a thing as a true believer?
 Aren't all those religious people just in it for the divine blessings?

Which raises an even more pressing question:
 Is there really a true God?—
 Is there a God who is worthy of our worship, our love, our trust—
 regardless of our circumstances?

That's what this book is about—
 and that is the question we must all answer.
 There is none more important in all of life. /

And this morning, as we look at the first two chapters,
 we want to consider the dramatic stage that is set
 for the struggle to come.

We'll look at it in three parts—
 First, in the opening verses,
 the description of Job as a godly man.

¹ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam, 2006), 51.

² *River Out of Eden*, Basic Books, 1995, p. 133

³ "An Inland Voyage," in *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson*, vol. 2 (Boston: Jefferson Press, 1895), p. 30.

Then comes the entrance of the mysterious Satanic figure and his cynical accusation.

And finally, we'll look God's part in all this—
 which may be the most challenging part of all.
 I call it the divine gambit—the bargain that is made,
 the test that is set,
 to see if the cynic will indeed have the last word.

We'll wait to consider all that happens to Job and his reactions to it until next week.

So, finally, let's turn to the Book of Job—
 Job 1:1—"In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job.
 This man was blameless and upright;
 he feared God and shunned evil."

This verse sets the scene for all that follows—
 Without this premise, the rest of the story loses all its dramatic power.
 There is no mistake, no uncertainty in the author's mind—
 this man Job is a godly man.

This fact is expressed in a four-fold description
 that is used of no other person in the entire Bible—
 and its cumulative effect is powerful.

The description of Job's piety comes in two pairs.
 First, he is said to be "**blameless and upright**"—
 characterizing him as a man of untarnished character and genuine faith.

The word for "**blameless**" does not mean that Job was without sin—
 Job himself refers to "**the iniquities of my youth**" in 13:26,
 and "**my sin**" in 14:16.
 "**Blameless**" here simply points to a Job's moral character—
 It speaks of his genuineness and authenticity.
 There is nothing hypocritical about him.
 Job was a man of "personal integrity, not sinless perfection."⁴

The next term "**upright**" is similar—
 but it shifts the focus away from Job's own character
 to the way he treated other people.
 He acted fairly in his dealings with others;
 he showed mercy to those in need.

The second pair of descriptions turns toward his relationship with God.
 "His religion was shaped by humble piety"⁵—
 "**he feared God and shunned evil.**"

⁴ Hartley, p. 31.

⁵ Ash, p. 32.

This "**fear of God**" is often depicted in the Bible as the supreme mark of the godly person.
It is the beginning of wisdom,
and the proper posture of the human being
in reverence and awe before their Creator.
Fundamentally it means respecting God as God
and treating him accordingly.

And as a result, Job "**shunned** evil."
Job's religion issues in a godly morality—
he maintained a constant repentant heart,
habitually turning away from evil in his thoughts, words and deeds.⁶

There is no question—
Job is a genuine believer, a model of godliness./

Again, this is not to say that Job was a perfect man, a sinless man—
only one man who ever lived fits that description.

But Job's condition is like that of Noah—
Noah was said in Gen. 6:9 to be
"**a righteous man, blameless among the people of this time
and he walked with God.**"

But in the Book of Hebrews,
Noah is especially commended for his faith—
for, the writer tells us,
it was by faith that he heeded God's warning and built an ark,
and so he became "**heir of the righteousness that comes by faith**" (Heb. 11:7).

Noah was righteous by faith,
and so was Job—and so is any sinner before God,⁷
and all the evidence of Job's life confirmed the reality of that faith./

So let's get this clear in our heads—
As one writer describes him—
"Job is a real believer, genuine in his integrity,
upright in his relationships,
pious in his worship,
and penitent in his behavior.
His life was marked by what we would call repentance and faith,
which are still the marks of the believer today, as they have always been."⁸

This is the clear assessment of Job's condition—
an assessment that is never contradicted by the narrator,
and it is affirmed by God himself twice in the book's first two chapters
and then again in the last (1:8; 2:6; 42:7,8).
Only his friends will deny it.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., p. 33.

So hold on to it--
 you will miss the point of the book if you forget it.
 Job is a godly man.

In v. 1 our author asserts that Job was a good man,
 in the following verses he describes his greatness.

v. 2--"**He had seven sons and three daughters,
 and he owned seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels,
 five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred donkeys,
 and had a large number of servants.
 He was the greatest man among all the people of the East.**"

Here is a somewhat stylized picture of "the good life" in the currency of that age—
 great wealth in family and possessions,
 along with a high social stature in the community.

We might speak of a penthouse apartment in New York
 or a horse farm in Middleburg, overflowing with family,
 CEO of his company, with thousands of employees,
 a generous philanthropist,
 an elder in his church,
 his advice was sought after by governors and senators alike,
 he had his own podcast
 and a vast multitude of Twitter followers.

What else could anyone want?
 By that standard, Job was a great man.

In a sense, this is just what you would expect—
 a man of such character before God should be blessed with such abundance.

You get the distinct impression here that Job's goodness
 is the cause of his greatness—

For doesn't the psalmist in Psalm 1 tell us,
 "[The righteous man] **is like a tree planted by streams of water,
 which yields its fruit in season
 and whose leaf does not wither.
 Whatever he does prospers.**"

This is how it ought to be, isn't it?
 Shouldn't piety lead to prosperity?

But we are left with the question—
 If Job is great because he is good,
 will he continue to be good when he is no longer great?

The final illustration of Job's character in vv. 4,5 reinforces what has just been said.
 After each of the joyous family feasts—probably birthday parties—
 Job would make it his habit
 to sacrifice a burnt offering for each of his children—just in case:

**"Perhaps [God forbid!] my children have sinned
and cursed God in their hearts."**

Such was the heart of Job—
he was ever mindful of what it means to be righteous before God—
even in the hearts of his children.
This is the man whose life is about to be turned upside down.

For in v. 6, the story suddenly veers in another direction,
as the setting shifts from earth to heaven,
and we listen in on a dramatic interchange that Job is never privy to.

**"One day the angels came to present themselves before the LORD,
and Satan also came with them."**

Here we have some sort of heavenly council,
as the company of angels, "**the sons of God**," appear before the Lord,
ready to do his bidding,⁹
"and Satan also came with them."¹⁰

Who is this Satan figure?

The Hebrew word שָׂטָן means "adversary" or "accuser."
(The Greek translation of that is διάβολος or devil.)
and here the word comes with the definite article "the,"
giving emphasis to the role of this figure--¹¹
He is "the accuser."

Along with the angelic council comes one
who stands against God and his people in some way./

In v. 7, it is the Lord who initiates the interchange--
He says to this adversary, "**Where have you come from?**"
What have you been up to?
What is your business here?

**Satan answered the LORD,
"From roaming through the earth and going back and forth in it."**

Two things to notice about this—
First, is the absence of any deferential language that would be appropriate
in the presence of high and mighty King.
The Satan speaks in a disrespectful tone—abrupt and almost insolent.

And second, the impression is that the earth, not heaven,
is his designated sphere of activity.

⁹ Cf. Zech 6:5: "The angel answered me, "These are the four spirits of heaven, going out from standing in the presence of the Lord of the whole world."

¹⁰ The Hebrew is not clear whether "the satan" is a part of this council or not. Because of the question addressed to him, I think it best to consider him an outsider (so Anderson).

¹¹ In the OT שָׂטָן is first used as a proper noun in the very late text 1 Chr. 21:1.

I think of Peter's words in the New Testament:

**"Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion
looking for someone to devour"** (1 Pet. 5:8).

So the Satan was up to no good—

looking for someone to accuse,

someone on God's side to sabotage and subvert,

some way to undermine faith in the supposed goodness and glory of God.

That shouldn't be too hard,

for in Satan's view, there can be so such thing as a genuine believer.

But God begs to disagree.

v. 8-- **"Then the LORD said to Satan,**

"Have you considered my servant Job?

There is no one on earth like him;

he is blameless and upright,

a man who fears God and shuns evil."

"I know Job's heart—

he is faithful and loyal—

a man of integrity and real godliness

He is truly "**my servant**," God says.

"There is no one like him.

In all your efforts to discover

if there is such a thing as a genuine believer,

"have you considered my servant Job?"

Satan is unimpressed.

"Does Job fear God for nothing?" Satan replied.

10

"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.

11 **But stretch out your hand and strike everything he has,**

and he will surely curse you to your face." /

It's the cynic's taunt.

All this pious sanctity you see in your man Job—

it's all a show, a pretense—

He doesn't care about you, God—

and your supposed glory and majesty.

That's not it at all--

It's all about him, and how he reaps the benefits of all this religiosity—

the sheep, the cattle, the camels and all the rest—

take that away, and he will want nothing to do with you.

So what do you make of that?

Isn't it true that many around the world are hearing a message
that promises just what the devil is describing—
that putting your faith in God is the very means to health and wealth?

Put your faith in God, and he will be at your beck and call—

All you have to do is ask—

If you are poor, God can make you rich;

if you are sick, he can make you well.

And why wouldn't he?

We're his beloved children, aren't we?

What father, if his son asks for a fish, will give him a snake?

No, ask and you will receive—

If you only have enough faith,

it will all be yours.

And, of course, the preachers of this prosperity gospel

have to show by their extravagant lifestyle

with their fancy cars and big houses and even private jets

that it works, and it can work for you, too.

"Does Job fear God for nothing?"

Do many "believers" around the world today fear God for nothing? //

Now, we here at Cornerstone are a little more sophisticated than that—

that's way too materialistic for us—

we would never be so crass.

And, truth be told, we're wealthy enough already.

But we have our own version of the prosperity gospel,

in the form of the therapeutic gospel.¹²

The reward that we count on is not material, but emotional;

what Jesus promises is not objective wealth

but subjective well being.

Invite Jesus into your heart,

and he will fill you up with peace and hope and eternal joy.

He will give you an "abundant life"—

and we have lots of ways that we can define that abundance.

Put your faith in Christ, and he will give you the life you want—

"your best life now,"

with a no-hassle guarantee.

We don't fear God for nothing—

no, we fear God for the blessings he gives.

How right is the Satan about Job?

How right is the Satan about you?

¹² See Ash, p.?

In this opening chapter, we have seen a godly man,
and a cynical taunt,
and finally this morning we want to look at what may be
the most challenging part of the whole story—
what I call a **divine gambit**—
God's willingness to put Satan's claim to the test.

Satan had said,
**"stretch out your hand and strike everything [Job] has,
and he will surely curse you to your face."**

The Lord then says to Satan in v. 12,
**"Very well, then, everything he has is in your hands,
but on the man himself do not lay a finger."**

What?!
"Very well, then, everything he has is in your hands"!

"Go ahead," God is saying,
"Bring this godly man, my servant Job, to utter ruin—
have all his sheep and cattle and camels and all his servants
get carried away by foreign invaders,
then kill all ten of his children
when the house in which they are all together
celebrating a birthday collapses and crushes them.

And that's just stage one—
After that comes the bodily assault on poor job—
Satan gets to assail him with painful sores that cover his whole body.
He is left to rot, as he sits among the ashes of the garbage heap.

"He's all yours, Satan, go to it.
And we'll see if you're right about my servant Job."

How is this possible?
How could a good and just God possibly agree to such a deal?

Now, let's be clear—
On the one hand, Satan is the bad guy in all this—
he is the actual agent of destruction.
It is his hand that directly afflicts Job.
And some people try to say that that gets God off the hook.
They say that Job is wrong to complain to God at all—
it is Satan that he ought to revile and rail against.

But that's too simple.
And leaving it at that makes no sense of the rest of the book.

As we'll see, Job's complaint throughout is with God, not Satan.
Job knows God to be ultimately responsible for what happens to him,

and that assumption is no where contested.
And certainly not by God when he finally speaks for himself.
And in chap. 2 God seems to take responsibility for what happens
when God says that Satan incited him against Job to ruin him (2:3).

Yes, God never acts with malicious intent, ever.

But he is still in charge, even when secondary agents like Satan act badly.
Make no mistake, Satan must ask permission to harm poor Job.

He has no authority on his own.

God and Satan are not two equal powers vying for control of the universe.

The devil exists, but as Martin Luther used to say,
he is "God's devil."

And God has him on a leash.

He can only do what the Lord allows him to do.

But throughout the Bible we see that whatever evil the Lord allows the devil to do,
God also can use for his good purposes.

So at a number of places in the Bible,
we have what you would call dual intentions at work—
in the same act, the devil can intend it for evil,
while God can intend it for good.

A classic biblical example of this is seen
in the actions of Joseph's brothers in the book of Genesis.
They acted cruelly in selling Joseph into slavery,
but in the end Joseph forgives them and says,
**"You intended to harm me,
but God intended it for good
to accomplish what is now being done,
the saving of many lives"** (Gen. 50:20).

One act with two different actors with two different intentions:
one evil and one good.

And, of course, the ultimate example of this is found
in the crucifixion of God's own Son, Jesus Christ.
It was a most evil act—perpetrated by evil men,
yet God acted through it to bring blessing to the whole world.

So understand this—
Satan perpetrates the sufferings that Job endures,
and by them Satan intends to tempt Job to evil—
to curse God to his face.

But Satan drops out as a character in the rest of the book.

But the story revolves around God's intentions in all this—
what is he up to in these tragic events?

Why would he ever agree to such a bargain with the devil—
a bargain that means inflicting pain on an innocent man,
not to mention all sorts of collateral death and destruction?

Some suggest that one way out of this theological dilemma
is to see the book simply as a grand stylized drama--
an essentially fictional morality play,
one that paints the most extreme picture imaginable
to heighten the tension in such a way
as to make the spiritual struggle of Job with God
as intense as possible.

In other words,
Don't worry, they say,
no one was actually harmed in the making of this book.

That's possible, but I don't think so—
yes, the descriptions may be stylized,
but I think Job was a real, well-known person,
and surely something really bad must have happened to him
to make him as famous as he was.

In any event, you still have to wrestle with
why God allows such bad things to happen—
even in the story.

I think if you are troubled by God allowing the death of Job's children in this story
you are exactly where the author wants you to be.

That's the point.
You should be unsettled and provoked by all this.
You are exactly where Job was—
wondering how it is possible for a good and just God
to allow such things to happen.

Our preconceived ideas about God,
just like Job's and his friends',
are challenged by this.

We want God to act in predictable and self-evidently good ways, don't we?
God is supposed to act in the ways that we think a good God should act.
But what do we do when he doesn't?¹³

God himself admits in 2:3 that he was incited to ruin Job "**without any reason.**"
Job was an innocent man;
he was a godly man.
There was no apparent justification—
no reason based on any justice known to us—
for God to have allowed Job to be ruined as he was.

¹³ See Wilson, pp. 274f.

And this is exactly what the book is about—
Can we hold on to God in faith,
will we fear him,
even when we don't feel like it,
even when it's not easy,
even when God is not acting the way God is supposed to act,
and we can't understand what he is allowing to happen in our lives,
and it all seems a mysterious travesty of justice?

"Does Job fear God for nothing?" /

I call this a taunt,
a provocation,
even an insult.
For behind Satan's question
is not only the accusation that there is no such thing as a genuine believer—
one who really worships God for who he is
and not just for what they can get out of him.

This is also an accusation against God himself—
First, that God has been wrong to bless Job as he has,
because Job's faith is not genuine anyway.
But even more is the further implication that God himself
is not really worthy of worship—
worship for his own sake and not just for the good things he gives us.
This statement is an assault on the intrinsic glory of God himself.

God's willingness to engage in this gambit with Satan
is ultimately about that—
God's own glory.
It's not just that Job's faith is on the line here,
God's own glory is at stake.

Christopher Ash puts it this way:
"In some deep way it is necessary for it to be publicly seen by the whole universe
that God is worthy of the worship of a man
and that God's worth is in no way dependent on God's gifts."¹⁴

He points to Peter's words in the New Testament, which we read earlier—
1 Peter 1:6f--

**"now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief
in all kinds of trials.
7 These have come so that your faith --
of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire --
may be proved genuine
and may result in praise, glory and honor**

¹⁴ p. 44.

when Jesus Christ is revealed."

The "**praise, glory and honor**" that rightly belongs to God
is somehow demonstrated and displayed
when the faith of God's people is tested and found genuine.
Such faith manifests the truth that God is worthy of worship.

This is what the cynic can never understand—
the cynic denies the reality of a goodness that is unassailable;
a beauty than cannot be spoiled,
and a truth that stands forever.
The cynic denies a God who is worthy of all praise, glory and honor.

That's what the angelic chorus sings incessantly in heaven—
"**You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power.**"

But Satan, he never joins in.

The question of this book is, Will **Job**?

The question of this hour is, Will **you**? //

Prayer—

Closing Song: *How Great Is Our God*

Benediction:

Rom. 11:33-36 Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!
"Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?"
"Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?"
For from him and through him and to him are all things.
To him be the glory forever! Amen.

The Book of Job:
A Window into a World
of Suffering and Faith, #2
1/14/17

The Cynic's Taunt **Job 1-2**

This morning we consider the dramatic stage that is set for the struggle to come—the Lord's encounter with the Satanic accuser. The question that is raised is a very contemporary one—is there really such a thing as a true believer? or, is there really a God worth believing in?

*"I hate cynicism a great deal worse than I do the devil,
unless, perhaps, the two were the same thing."
-- Robert Louis Stevenson*

I. A Godly Man

*"Job . . . was blameless and upright;
he feared God and shunned evil" (1:1).*

II. A Cynical Accusation

"Does Job fear God for nothing?" (1:9).

III. A Divine Gambit

*"Very well, then,
everything he has is in your hands" (1:12).*

Sermon Discussion:

**The Cynic's Taunt
Job 1-2**

- What evidences of cynicism have you noticed in our culture—that “distrusting, disbelieving, contemptuous, attitude, which holds a low opinion of mankind” and which questions the reality of true goodness, truth and beauty?
- In vv. 1-5 Job is displayed as a godly man. How would you portray a godly person if you were write your own "Book of Job"? Why is this portrayal of Job essential to the story of the book?
- Who is responsible for Job's suffering? How do you understand the Bible's depiction of "dual intentionality"? How does this maintain the reality of evil? Why is important that we not deny that God is ultimately sovereign over all that happens in our lives, even when it is sometimes hard?
- What is the "therapeutic gospel"? How is it like the "prosperity gospel"?
- Should piety lead to prosperity? Why or why not?
- How does God's willingness to go along with Satan's taunt strike you? How does it provoke you? How does it draw you into the message of the book?