

When Tragedy Occurs

Printed Text • Job 1:14-15, 18-19, 22; 3:1-3, 11

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: DISCUSS some of the insights for living with suffering caused by tragedy; BE CHALLENGED to share our feelings about specific tragedies in our own lives; and IDENTIFY ways to work with God to use our suffering to serve a higher purpose.

In Focus

After Roger lost his daughter in a drive-by shooting, he still remained a faithful believer. He even forgave the shooters. But he continued to struggle with the mission that God had given him. God wanted him to evangelize to the underprivileged children in the community where his daughter was murdered.

He went to his minister for counseling, where he hoped to find answers that might reconcile his rebellion against God.

After engaging in small talk, Roger released his well of emotions. “I want to continue the work God set out for me, but I can’t. I keep asking myself, why did God let this happen? And why should I go back into that community?”

His minister listened and let the Holy Spirit guide his words. “Listen, Roger, you must lean on the fact that all the promises of God are endless, but they all end with a period. We cannot change God’s periods.” Roger, confused, asked, “What do you mean?” Reverend White continued, “Death, is a period. God has an eternal story that He has written. When a death in the family, floods, or tornadoes come a believer’s way, we cannot help but ask God why He allows those things to happen to His people. What I’m suggesting is that instead of bringing up the question marks, we must strive for a comma.”

Roger sighed in disappointment. “What does a comma have to do with the questions that are weighing on my heart?” “A comma means to wait for the answer. Sometimes the answers to life’s questions come only by trusting what God has written on the next page in eternity. If God wants you in that community, He may very well use your suffering for His higher purpose.”

When tragedy occurs, today’s lesson tells us to continue talking with God. He wants to dialogue with us about everything, even about our doubts and fears.

Keep In Mind

“Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil? In all this did not Job sin with his lips” (from Job 2:10, KJV).

Words You Should Know

- A. Sabbeans** (Job 1:15) Sheba (Heb.) – A Semitic people known to be “men of stature” (Isaiah 45:14) who settled in Sheba, known today as Marib, located in Yemen.
- B. Cursed his day** (3:1) qalal yowm (Heb.) – Job “cursed his day” as a rhetorical wish to escape life’s adversities, hardships, and difficulties “without having lived.” To curse one’s day was a way of lamenting the worthlessness of one’s life.
- C. Give Up the Ghost** (v. 11) g av a’ (Heb.) – To be ready to die; to be about to die; to expire.

Say It Correctly

Sabean. SA-bae-an

KJV

Job 1:14 And there came a messenger unto Job, and said, The oxen were plowing, and the asses feeding beside them:

15 And the Sabeans fell upon them, and took them away; yea, they have slain the servants with the edge of the sword; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee.

18 While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, Thy sons and thy daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother's house:

19 And, behold, there came a great wind from the wilderness, and smote the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young men, and they are dead; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee.

22 In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly.

3:1 After this opened Job his mouth, and cursed his day.

2 And Job spake, and said,

3 Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, There is a man child conceived.

NLT

Job 1:14 a messenger arrived at Job's home with this news: "Your oxen were plowing, with the donkeys feeding beside them, 15 when the Sabeans raided us. They stole all the animals and killed all the farmhands. I am the only one who escaped to tell you."

18 While he was still speaking, another messenger arrived with this news: "Your sons and daughters were feasting in their oldest brother's home. 19 Suddenly, a powerful wind swept in from the wilderness and hit the house on all sides. The house collapsed, and all your children are dead. I am the only one who escaped to tell you."

22 In all of this, Job did not sin by blaming God.

3:1 At last Job spoke, and he cursed the day of his birth.

2 He said:

3 "Let the day of my birth be erased, and the night I was conceived.

The People, Places, and Times

Job. The central character in the book of Job may have lived during the time of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He was "perfect and upright." He "feared God, and eschewed evil" (Job 1:1). He was a responsible husband and father (vv. 2, 5) and was richly blessed with material goods (v. 3). He had good health and was highly respected by others. In short, Job "was the greatest of all the men of the east" (v. 3). "God's intimate friendship blessed his house" (29:4, NIV).

The Land of Uz. Bible scholars tell us that the location is uncertain. Some believe, however, that it was in the Arabian or Syrian Desert, east of Palestine—east of the Jordan River near Canaan (Israel) where the Israelites would later live. Lamentations 4:21 and Genesis 36:28 suggest that Uz was in the vicinity of Edom. From the Scriptures, most scholars know that Uz had succulent, thriving pastures and crops (Job 1:3). They also know that it lay close to the Sabeans and Chaldeans, who raided them (vv. 14–17).

Eliphaz. He was the first and most prominent of Job's three friends. He had come from a great distance to comfort an ailing buddy (Job 2:11). Scriptures describe him as a distinguished thinker or sage of Teman in Edom, which was known for its wisdom (Jeremiah 49:7). Bildad. He was the second friend to visit Job, a Shuhite (one of the sons of Abraham and Keturah from Genesis 25:2; Job

2:11; 8:1, 18:1; 25:1; 42:9). Bible scholars believe that Bildad's home was the Assyrian land of Shuhu, south of Haran, near the middle Euphrates River. Elihu. He was Job's young friend, who raised the discussion of Job's suffering to a higher theological level. He tried to show a hurting Job that greater wisdom comes by inspiration, instead of human experience and tradition (Job 32:2–6, 8–9; 34:1; 35:1; 36:1).

Zophar. He was also a friend and counselor of Job (2:11; 11:1; 20:1; 42:9). His home is unknown, but Bible scholars surmise that it was in Edom or northern Arabia. He agreed with Job's other friends in attributing Job's suffering to his sins and spoke bluntly and harshly to Job.

Background

In Job's day, trouble and suffering were viewed as the consequence of one's sin. It was believed that since God is love and all-powerful, He cannot be the source or cause of suffering. Moreover, it was reasoned that since God is holy and has zero tolerance for sin, He cannot let those who sin go unpunished. This line of thought led to the conclusion that sin is at the root of all suffering, trouble, and pain.

Each of Job's peers, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, speaks from this vantage point. From their perspective, Job's tragic situation was evidence of some unconfessed sin in his life.

For example, Eliphaz questions Job (Job 4:7–8; 22:5, 6). Bildad also voices the perspective that sin is behind all suffering (Job 8:3-6, 13; see also Job 18:21). Zophar affirms the thought that Job's suffering is because of some sin in Job's life (Job 11:6). In fact, Zophar proceeds to plead with Job to confess his sin in order that he might again experience God's peace (Job 11:14–19).

These assumptions, however, do not speak to Job's situation. Job is innocent! His defense begs the question, "Why do the righteous suffer?" Why do bad things happen to good people? And what are good people to do—curse God, or embrace their pain and recommit their lives to His care? What are good people to do when tragedy occurs and leaves in its wake a torrent of suffering and trouble?

Job is confident that God will eventually come to his aid and give him the resources he needs to go on trusting God and live creatively with the suffering and pain occasioned by tragedy. What faith! This is the faith that overcomes the world. This is the faith that overcomes anything and everything that life may hurl at those who dare to place their lives in God's hands.

At-A-Glance

1. Job's Tragedies (Job 1:14–15)
2. Job's Nonverbal Response to His Tragedies (vv. 18–19)
3. Job's Faith Response to His Tragedies (v. 22)
4. Job's Faith Bogs Down in Despair (3:1–3, 11)

In Depth

1. Job's Tragedies (Job 1:14–15)

Truly, Job was a godly man who left no stone unturned in his devotion to God; yet, within a matter of seconds, he received the worst possible news from four messengers, one on the heels of the other. He was wiped out by natural calamity and the vicious attacks of men. All these tragedies were the

work of the Accuser, Satan. Job had no idea that Satan was using him to challenge God. Nor did Job know that his suffering would be used by God to defeat Satan. Job's life had become a combat zone where God and Satan battled for Job's allegiance.

God was pleased to announce to Satan that Job was His unique and most faithful servant. Satan countered God's boast by charging that Job was faithful only because he enjoyed God's favor. In short, Satan told God that when His blessings ceased to flow in Job's direction, "he will curse thee to thy face" (Job 1:11). For reasons known only to Him, God responded to Satan's challenge in a way that would ultimately test Job's resolve to be faithful in the absence of divine blessings.

As soon as God released Job into Satan's power, Job was struck with a terrible series of tragedies. The writer uses four different scenes to illustrate that over an unknown period of time, Job was deprived of every material blessing and nearly all family and friendship ties. Job was completely stripped of all God's favors. Eventually, his health failed and he was left destitute (2:7). Satan had Job where he wanted him, namely, outside of God's apparent protection.

We should note, however, that Job's destitute position was due, not to Satan's power, but to God's power. The writer wants his readers to know that Satan could do nothing to Job without God's permission. While Job may not have been immediately aware of God's active and continuing intervention, he was aware of God's availability. Suffering may blind us to God's active intervention, but it need not blind us to His availability. God is always available to us even though we may not be able to see any evidence of His intervention. Faith enables us to see that God is always keeping watch over His own.

2. Job's Nonverbal Response to His Tragedies (vv. 18–19)

Upon hearing the reports of his tragic losses, Job remained silent. The reader is informed of Job's silence by the writer's use of the poetic device, "While he (i.e., the messenger of Job's bad news) was yet speaking" (Job 1:16–18). This phrase implies that Job's first response to the tragedies reported to him was one of complete silence. The sudden news about the successive tragedies renders Job speechless. He says nothing. Job is deeply shaken. He is able to express himself only with the mourning gestures known in ancient Israel. He "rent his mantle [tore his robe], and shaved his head, and fell down upon the ground" (v. 20).

Silence is a natural first response to tragedy which affects us personally. We cannot immediately put our feelings into words. We are shocked, stunned, and, in some ways, traumatized. Words elude us. We can only cry and groan inwardly. We may even express ourselves in a primordial scream that expresses our sense of helplessness in the face of circumstances we wish were different but know we cannot change. Our emotions swing back and forth between anger and denial.

3. Job's Faith Response to His Tragedies (v. 22)

Faith in God is a tremendous source of strength when one is facing tragic loss. Handling the personal stress occasioned by loss is one of life's greatest challenges, and it requires a strong and viable faith. William E. Hulme has helpfully noted that Job went "from a position of prominence in the community to becoming the butt of scoffers." It is instructive to note, however, that "In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly" (Job 1:22). This statement, which summarizes Job's faith response to the tragedies that had befallen him, teaches at least two things about faith. The first is that faith is not dependent upon the constant flow of God's blessings. Second, while faith may be tested and is often severely shaken, it is not necessarily destroyed by tragic loss.

Although the culmination of Job's losses did not destroy his faith, it did create for him a religious problem, best summarized in the question: What kind of God would allow these tragic things to happen to me when I have been so faithful to Him?

4. Job's Faith Bogs Down in Despair (3:1–3, 11)

The religious problem that Job faced brought him to the very edge of despair. His days of silence had ended. His days of questioning God's mysterious ways with those who trusted Him had begun. Job began to entertain thoughts that caused him to have some doubts about God's fairness and justice. Job knew that he had done everything he could to sustain an ever-growing and intimate relationship with God. What he could not understand, however, was why God had ceased bestowing His blessings. Job wanted desperately to know why God had withdrawn His care and favor. We tend to be well versed in faith's capacity to believe. We have much homework to do, however, if we are to embrace faith's capacity to doubt or to at least question God's ways with us. Doubt is not faith's enemy, nor is it the opposite of faith. The opposite of faith is unbelief. Unbelief says, "There is no God with whom to discuss the tragedies of life." Faith that dares to doubt says, "There is a God whose ways I do not fully understand. Therefore, I will be honest about my doubts and pray that God will entertain my questions and in His own time reassure me of His care and guidance." Job's religious problem is common to all who are challenged to live with the terrible consequences of tragedy. Have you ever been in a tragic situation and asked God for help, only to feel that He was not helping at all? You waited and waited, you kept on petitioning God to intervene and change your circumstances, and things grew worse. Job is not hesitant about exercising the faith to engage with doubt. His first step toward dealing with his doubts involves being honest with himself, honest enough to admit his sense of anguish and despair over God's treatment of him. Job is to be commended for having the kind of faith that takes doubt seriously. He "opened . . . his mouth, and cursed his day" (Job 3:1). In other words, Job's situation of loss coupled with his bewilderment about God's ways results in his desire to die without having lived. Job is not threatening suicide here. Rather, he is lamenting the day of his birth. He reasons that if he had not been born, he would not have experienced the tragedies that had brought him to the point of despair.

Tragedy is a part of living in a fallen world. Moreover, God has not promised people of faith a life free of tragedy. He has promised, however, to be with us when tragedy occurs. In the face of tragedy, we may, like Job, rue the day of our birth. But let us pray that at the end of the day our faith, and our continued dialogue with God about our doubts, will give us the spiritual resources necessary to live victoriously with the consequences of tragedy.

Search the Scriptures

1. In whose house were Job's sons and daughters partying (Job 1:18)?
2. "And, behold, there came a great wind from the _____, and smote the four corners of the _____, and it fell" (v. 19).
3. "After this opened Job his mouth, and _____ his day" (3:1).
4. "Why did I not give up the _____ when I came out of the belly?" (v. 11).

Discuss the Meaning

1. What can faith do to help us live with tragedy?
2. What was the common thought or theological perspective of the times when tragedy visited Job?
3. What two things have you learned about living with tragedy?

Liberating Lesson

Few, if any, people live tragedy-free lives. Tragedy comes with the territory of living in a fallen world, a world where sin and human error abound. Everyone is a potential recipient of some kind of tragedy.

We would all do well, therefore, to develop a faith that does not give up on God when tragedy occurs. God is with us when we celebrate on the mountain peaks of life. He is also with us when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. His guidance and His care are always at our disposal.

Therefore, we would do well to entrust our all, including our doubts, to God's care, and to dare to believe that He will work with people of goodwill to make tragedy's consequences serve some higher purpose. When we do this, our faith will live and grow all the more when tragedy occurs.

Application For Activation

This week, identify someone with whom you are acquainted and who is living with the terrible consequences of some tragedy. Take the time to pray for them. Visit or call them and listen to their story. Raise with them the kinds of questions that will encourage them to discuss their doubts and questions with you and in prayer with God. Listen to them. Empathize with them. You will probably not have answers to their questions. You can, however, encourage them to share their feelings with God in the confidence that He cares and understands.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Job 1:14–15, 18–19, 22; 3:1–3, 11

The title of this week's lesson isn't if tragedy occurs, but when. Unexpected tragedies are realities in all of our lives. Accidents, acts of nature, and deliberate criminal behavior are often the causes. Of the four tragedies that befell Job, two resulted from human actions and two from acts of nature. None occurred because of something Job had done.

The crush of crimes and calamities that confronted Job forced him to make a choice. Could he justify trusting God when faced with the unfairness of life? Or was the pain of tragedy a sufficient reason to deny God's love or His power to overcome evil or both? People have struggled with this question in the past, and every living person must still seek answers to it today.

The setting of the book of Job appears to be before the formation of the nation of Israel. None of the main characters in the story, including Job, was from Israel. There is no reference to the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob, to Moses, the lawgiver, or to David, Israel's greatest king. In the 42

chapters of this book, there is only one mention of the law, or torah (Heb. TOHR-ah, meaning “instruction” (Job 22:22).

This point has led some scholars to suggest that Job could be the oldest book in the Bible. Three clues indicate that the story of Job was initially transmitted orally. It was not put into writing until long after Job’s trials took place.

First, many foreign words are used in Job that did not appear in the Hebrew language until after the captives returned from exile. Second, the last three servants who arrived to announce disaster are introduced by the same phrase (Job 1:16, 18) and their announcements end with the exact same word (Job 1:15, 17, 19). This is typical of information that was told and retold over a long stretch of time. Third, Job’s name means “the assailed,” “the hated one,” or “the persecuted one.” This suggests that “Job” may be a nickname given in light of what he endured. In addition, almost the entire book of Job was written in the Hebrew form of poetry.

This poetic form helped Hebrews memorize the parts of the Bible that God had inspired at that time. Unlike English poetry that rhymes, Hebrew poetry repeats words and makes use of emphases and parallel thoughts. Job was a godly man. God described him to Satan as a “perfect (blameless) and upright” man (Job 1:1). He lived a blessed life. The second verse in chapter 1 tells us that Job had 10 children. Ten was not symbolic of perfection but of fullness or sufficiency. Seven of his children were sons; the number seven was symbolic of perfection. So with 10 children, 7 of whom were sons, Job had all a man could ask for in a family. In addition, Job was enormously rich. Verse 3 lists his possessions—sheep and camels in the thousands. Owning one camel was a sign of wealth and status. To have thousands of camels suggests that Job was a caravan operator or a dealer in camels. Job had 500 yoke of oxen. A yoke holds two oxen; thus, “500 yoke” means he owned 1,000 oxen. Taken together, these details tell us that Job was a highly successful, well-respected, happy, godly man. Yet all that was about to change.

14 And there came a messenger unto Job, and said, The oxen were plowing, and the asses feeding beside them.

This verse tells us that it was not winter, since the servants had the oxen out in the field plowing. All of Job’s children had gathered for a family meal, which they took turns hosting. This shared responsibility suggests close family ties since the meals were not always held at the house of the eldest son, who traditionally became head of the family at his father’s passing.

On the day of the dinner, a servant “messenger” (Heb. mal’ak, mal-awk’) rushed up to Job. This same word is translated “angel” when referring to a heavenly messenger. As one servant after another comes and reports another loss, Job does not realize that these calamities are evidence of God’s confidence in him, rather than His displeasure.

15 And the Sabeans fell upon them, and took them away; yea, they have slain the servants with the edge of the sword; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee.

The Sabeans were a nomadic people from an area called Sheba about 1,000 miles from Job’s region. Sheba was at the extreme southern tip of the Arabian peninsula. The queen of that desert kingdom traveled to Israel to inquire about Solomon’s great wisdom (1 Kings 10:1–2). Elsewhere in the Bible, the Sabeans are known as traders and merchants (Job 6:19; Ezekiel 27:22).

The messenger described a peaceful farm scene. Fields were being plowed to turn the soil after seed had been sown. Job’s huge herd of donkeys was grazing in an adjoining pasture. Who would bother someone so rich, so prominent, “the greatest of all the men of the east” (Job 1:3)? Suddenly an army

of vicious cutthroats swarmed over both herds, hacking down one servant after another. The Hebrew word for “slain” is a’kah (haw-kaw’), which means “slay” or “kill.” The same word was used to describe savage, deadly attacks by bears or lions. In Deuteronomy 19:11, it is used to describe a vengeful, intentional murder.

People both then and now often make godless choices and behave in sinful ways that are contrary to what we would expect of them. As a result, innocent victims today are beaten, robbed, or murdered, just like Job’s servants were.

1:18 While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, Thy sons and thy daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother’s house: 19 And, behold, there came a great wind from the wilderness, and smote the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young men, and they are dead; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee.

Undoubtedly, Job’s children shared in their father’s prosperity. Verse 18 says that they were “eating and drinking wine.” The word “eating” here means more than taking nourishment; the Hebrew word used is ‘akal (aw-kal’) and means to consume or devour. This indicates they were having a great feast.

Although our lesson is focused on the first and last of Job’s tragedies, there were actually four. As the first servant came to announce a disaster, another servant came in and interrupted the servant who was giving his report. This interruption of the servant that was speaking was not an act of rudeness, but a result of his sense of urgency and alarm.

The first three events wiped out Job’s wealth, but the fourth, the death of all his children, broke his heart. The “wind” (Heb. ruwach, roo’-akh) here implies a strong wind similar to that of a whirlwind or tornado. Job’s sons and daughters were killed when the house “fell” on them (Heb. naphal, naw-fal’).

Satan and evil are free to inflict harm and heartbreak only to the extent God allows. God didn’t cause Job’s problems to take place, but He did allow them. These tragedies caused Job to confront a question we still struggle with today: Is suffering a good enough reason to deny God’s love or power? NO!

1:22 In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly.

After all the tragedy he had gone through, Job still didn’t sin! He didn’t blow up at God or curse the Sabeans or Chaldeans who had stolen his oxen, donkeys, and camels.

In fact, despite his deep grief, Job proved his faith in God by praising Him while confessing the loss he was feeling (v. 21).

Verse 22 shows that although Job grieved terribly, he didn’t sin when learning of his losses, nor did he sin later. “Sinned” here comes from the Hebrew word chata’ (khaw-taw’), which means to miss a target or get off track. Job did not let these disasters cause his faith in God to get off track. Instead, he fell face down on the ground in worship as a sign of submitting himself to God’s will.

Job didn’t charge God “foolishly” (Heb. tiphlah, tif-law’). Tiphlah is derived from the Hebrew word taphel meaning “unsavory” or “untempered.” In other words, despite all he had lost, Job didn’t accuse God of being angry or offended with him.

3:1 After this opened Job his mouth, and cursed his day. 2 And Job spake, and said,

Job was not using vulgar language. The word “cursed” (Heb. qalal, kaw-lal), as used here, means to make something unworthy, of no consequence, or contemptible. Job does not curse God; he simply despises the day he was born.

This verse occurs after a week of Job’s silence. After Job’s initial shock at his losses and reasons for grief, he had time to reflect. During that time, his wife came and told him he must have done something that she wasn’t aware of. She ordered him to quit trying to act righteous and “curse God, and die” (2:9). Job broke his silence and expressed his bitterness and frustration over what had happened to him and his family. Although his answer might seem to be toward his wife, it was more likely that he was just responding to the situation.

Some Christians still think that anger about injustice or the tragic unfairness of life is evidence of spiritual immaturity. The book of Job does not support that attitude. Job 1:8; 2:3; and 42:7 show God’s positive view of Job as a righteous man both before and after the tragedies he went through.

3 Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, There is a man child conceived.

Here Job is shown at his lowest point. He felt there was nothing left worth living for. Job wished the day he was born had never happened. The Hebrew word translated as “perish” is ‘abad (aw-bad’), which means to vanish or to be forgotten or blotted out. Because of his anguish, Job wanted the day of his birth announcement forgotten and blotted out from the minds of men.

3:11 Why died I not from the womb? why did I not give up the ghost when I came out of the belly?

Job questions God. The word “died” (Heb. muwth, mooth) means to die as a result of a penalty or to be put to death. Here Job seems to be asking God, “If I was to suffer like this, why was I born? Why didn’t I come out of the womb, take a breath, and die?” He was asking why he had to be born if he had to go through all this and come to this end.

Many people have asked questions as they coped with heartbreaking losses, agonizing pain, or vicious brutality. For the next two Sundays, churches all over the world will stop to remember the Cross God allowed His Son to endure and the Resurrection that followed. As Christians recall the Easter events, perhaps we will find a new sense of God’s love and power in spite of the tragedies God allows, and find the faith to trust His will and wisdom.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday

Job 1:1-12

Tuesday

Job 1:13-22

Wednesday

Job 2:1-13

Thursday

Job 3:1-10

Friday

Job 3:11-19

Saturday

Job 3:20-26

Sunday

Job 1:14-15, 18-19, 22; 3:1-3, 11