

## It's OK to NOT be OK

# Two Stories & Two Stages

We're starting a new series of messages this week we're calling, "*It's OK to NOT be OK.*"

This past year we've all seen how deeply our world is not OK. This is the case not just last year, but of every human life in every generation. We're NOT OK.

Really one of the most important questions for people of faith is, "How do I hang on to God when it's not OK?" "What do I do when I'm filled with disappointment, confusion, anger, or fear? How do I keep going when it's not OK?"

Today to start this series, we visit one of the oldest, strangest, most powerful stories not just in the Bible but in all of human history. The story starts... ***"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. 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. His sons used to hold feasts in their homes on their birthdays, and they would invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. When a period of feasting had run its course, Job would make arrangements for them to be purified. Early in the morning he would sacrifice a burnt offering for each of them, thinking, 'Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts.' This was Job's regular custom."***

The story begins, "***In the land of Uz....***" Nobody knows where Uz was. We know it was in the east. We know when Adam and Eve had to leave the garden of Eden, they had to settle in the east. East of Eden in the Bible became a picture of where life is broken. In the beginning of this story, everything is as we think it should be. Everything is okay. Job is a pious man. He is cautious, so cautious he even offers sacrifices for his children just in case.

God gives Job a wonderful life, BUT trouble is coming to Uz. Uz is the place where very bad things happen to a very good man. Uz is the place not just where suffering comes but where it comes without warning and without explanation. Uz is the land of "not okay."

Everybody I'm talking to right now will spend some time in the land of Uz. Maybe you're there right now. There are so many people for whom life is not okay.

Now in verse 6 in this story, there's a radical shift in scenery. The writer sets up the book of Job like it's a play. There is action going on in two locations, with two different story lines. I want you to picture a theater with a lower stage and an upper stage. The lower stage would represent what's happening down here on earth. The upper stage would represent what's happening up in heaven.

This is crucial to the story of Job. We (the readers) know what's going on in both settings, but the characters on earth do not. All they can see is what's happening on earth. Job cannot see, he cannot hear, what's happening on the upper stage. So we go to the upper stage now.

***"One day the angels came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came with them. The LORD said to Satan, 'Where have you come from?' Satan answered the LORD, 'From roaming throughout the earth, going back and forth on it.' 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.'***

***'Does Job fear God for nothing?' Satan replied. '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. But now stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face.' The LORD said to Satan, 'Very well, then, everything he has is in your power, but on the man himself do not lay a finger.'"*** So Satan goes out. Job loses his livestock, his wealth, his servants, his children – he loses everything all

in one day. There is just one catastrophe after another after another until everything he had is wiped out. It's horrible. Everything is gone. Then, we wait to see how he responds.

This is what happens on the lower stage on earth: **"At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said: 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised.' In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing."**

We're told Job grieves. He worships. He speaks words of blessing and praise. In all this, he did not sin. Then the story switches back to the upper stage again.

**"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. And he still maintains his integrity, though you incited me against him to ruin him without any reason.' 'Skin for skin!' Satan replied. 'A man will give all he has for his own life. But now stretch out your hand and strike his flesh and bones, and he will surely curse you to your face.' The LORD said to Satan, 'Very well, then, he is in your hands; but you must spare his life.'"**

We need to talk for a moment about what's going on here, in the upper stage in heaven. Action in heaven looks really strange to us. A lot of people think the key question of the book of Job is, "Where is God in the midst of suffering?" But that's not the key question. The key question on the upper stage (really the key question of the whole book) is in Job, chapter 1, verse 9. **"Does Job fear God for nothing?"**

In other words, the idea Satan presents is, "God, Job is devoted to You and worships You only because it's in his self-interest. It's just quid-pro-quo. Job loves You the way the Cookie Monster loves the cookie jar. If you turn off the faucet of blessing, watch how fast Job will turn off the faucet of his devotion." That's Satan's idea of religion.

This idea is still very popular in our world today. Very often when life is not OK, we ask, "What did I do to deserve this?" And of course, we think we did nothing to deserve suffering. We believe God is being unfair, and unjust. Many people refuse to follow Jesus because they think the God we follow is uncaring. Cruel. Why do people suffer who aren't heinous criminals? They are good people, so they deserve a good life. We turn God into a kind of vending machine. You put your money in, make your selection, and that's what you get out. If you're good you get a good life, you deserve a good life, you demand a good life. **"Does Job fear God for nothing?"**

God, however, says in this book, "No. The view of Satan is cynical, warped, misguided, and wrong. God says, at the core of reality, at the core of the universe, is self-giving, self-sacrificial love. It's not quid pro quo. God is gracious and loving to both good and bad people. And times of NOT being OK come to both good and bad people. Life is not a machine that you get out what you put in. There is no cause-effect relationship. This means that when you are living in the land of not OK, hope in a loving God is infinitely bigger than the pain of the suffering you are going through. This is the big idea, the key reality of what goes on in the upper stage in heaven.

Down on earth, on the lower stage, Job gets hit with a second wave of suffering, and his body is covered with painful sores from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet. He sits on an ash heap, scrapes his sores with pottery shards. This time, there are some differences in his response than after the first wave of suffering. This time Job does not fall to the ground in worship. He does not say, "The name of the Lord be praised." He goes to an ash heap. He is sitting at the town dump. Maybe that's an act of grieving. Maybe he is being quarantined there so no one else gets it.

Job is struggling to understand God now. "Is God the kind of person who sends trouble? Is God really good?" he's wondering. Have you ever wondered that? Most people have.

We're told that after this second wave of suffering, **"In all this, Job did not sin in what he said."** Do you remember after the first wave, the Bible simply said, **"In all this, Job did not sin..."** Now there's a little qualification. **"...Job did not sin in what he said."** In his heart, Job has begun

to struggle.

Then Job's friends hear about all his troubles, and they go out to comfort him. Here's what we're told in the second chapter. **"When they [Job's friends] saw [Job] from a distance, they could hardly recognize him; they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads."** They had heard it was a bad time for Job. But nothing prepared them for this.

Usually when you visit somebody in who's sick or in trouble, you try to cheer them up. You'll tell them, "That's not so bad. You don't look so bad. You look pretty good." Have you ever been sick and had somebody come to visit you, take one look at you, burst into tears, and rip their clothes apart? That's probably not going to cheer you up.

**"Then we are told Job's friends they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was."**

Finally, after seven days Job speaks. We are waiting eagerly to hear what Job will say. If he can just repeat what he said in chapter 1, "God gives. God takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord," the test will be over, and Job will be a really short, happy, little book.

What happens next? This is what happens next: **"Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth."** This is why Job did not have a big TV ministry, okay? This is not positive thinking kind of stuff.

For the next 28 chapters, Job pours out a level of bitterness and confusion and sorrow and doubt and anger toward God that is staggering. Here's a sample of what he says. **"The arrows of the Almighty are in me, my spirit drinks in their poison; God's terrors are marshaled against me."** Job is saying, "Hey, God, you're shooting at me." He goes on, **"...God has wronged me and drawn his net around me."**

Sometimes people will speak about the *patience* of Job. Have you heard that expression? Not in this book! Job's words are incredibly impatient. "How long? Why me? Speak up! Make it stop! Where are you? What's going on?" Have you ever asked those questions when you're Not OK? I bet you have!

Sometimes in suffering we're told, "Just trust in God." Not in this book! Job accuses God. Job blames God. Job challenges God. Job attacks God. Job confronts God, not as a skeptic, not as an atheist...as a believer.

He does this in such an honest, raw, vitriolic, unvarnished way that his three pious, God-believing friends can't stand it anymore. "Job, what are you saying?" They argue with him. They present an alternative point of view to what Job is saying.

Now their point of view is from what is called *Mesopotamian Wisdom Literature*. That's kind of ancient self-help books. The core idea in this literature is: **if you're suffering, you must have done bad. If you're prospering, you must have done good.** If you find yourself suffering, just identify what you've been doing wrong and stop doing it. Then your life will be good.

Now if you've ever read Job, you've noticed the middle 30 chapters of the book or so get incredibly repetitive and boring. It's okay to say that even though it's in the Bible. That's actually on purpose. See, the writer hits us over the head with this. Job does not claim to be perfect. The idea that we earn our blessing and our suffering is not true. That's what Job is saying, and he is living proof of that.

Still today, most people buy into the idea, "If my life is good, it's because I'm good. I worked hard, I stay out of trouble with the law, I go to my grand kids' soccer games, I do favors for my neighbors. If my life is good, it's because I'm good. And if I'm suffering it's because I've been bad."

Job's argument is, this is not true. He hasn't been bad and yet he is suffering. And Job, in his lower stage, limited view thinking, wants to argue his case with God. Job says, **"If only I knew where to find him; if only I could go to his dwelling! I would state my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments."**

In the end of the book, Job gets his wish. Job meets God Himself, face-to-face. But before Job gets a word out of his mouth, God speaks. **"Then the LORD spoke to Job out of the storm."**

Just imagine being Job right then, and God shows up. God puts Job on the hot seat, and asks Job point blank, **"Who is this that obscures my plans with words without knowledge?"** Job has accused God of horrible things, of being terribly unfair. Yet Job can only see the story line on the lower stage, on earth. Job does not have the perspective God has up in the upper stage.

So God puts it to Job. "You think you're so smart. OK. "Prepare to defend yourself. I'll question you. You answer me." **"Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone—while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?"** Job, of course, has no idea what God is up to on the upper stage. Job's knowledge is really small, really limited.

Now you notice if you read through the book, when God does appear, He doesn't seem to get around to answering Job's question of why. This is very important. It's very deliberate. Why does God do this?

For a long time when I read this book, it looked kind of mean on God's part, like He is kind of picking on a guy who, of course, is way dumber than God is. We're all dumber than God is. Now part of what's happening is God is pointing out Job has a finite mind and a limited point of view and should not expect to be able to understand everything. That's true for all of us, but something way more is going on that's very important.

There's an Old Testament scholar named Ellen Davis who points out God's questions are leading somewhere. They're indicating something about the kind of person God is. Look at this. God says, **"Who cuts a channel for the torrents of rain, and a path for the thunderstorm, to water a land where no one lives, an uninhabited desert, to satisfy a desolate wasteland and make it sprout with grass?"**

God's questions aren't to make Job look dumb. Through His questions God is teaching Job an important truth about life.

You see, in the ancient world in Israel, life depended on rainfall. They would never waste water. So why would God water a land where no one lives? Because God is a God of over-the-top goodness. He is good for no reason at all. He is good because He just loves to give, because it's just the nature of God's foolishly loving heart. He delights in animals that are of no apparent use at all. They're not strategic at all.

The book talks about God makes the ostrich. An ostrich flaps her wings joyfully, although she'll never fly. Her wings are utterly useless. She leaves her eggs in the ground, doesn't even remember where they were. She is a lousy parent. She is the opposite of Job. Remember Job was so cautious as a parent, he was really careful in case his kids might have sinned? But the ostrich doesn't even remember where she left her kids! She will never be "mother of the year." **"Yet when she spreads her feathers to run, she laughs at horse and rider."** God says, "I made the ostrich. Silly, useless animal. And I love her. I made her just to receive my goodness."

God says in chapter 40, **"I made the Behemoth useless to you."** This was probably the hippo. In the ancient world, that was considered a chaos monster that had to be destroyed, but not to God. God says he **"...ranks first among the works of God..."** "The best thing I ever did," God says. "I had my A-game going the day I made that Behemoth."

God delights in the wild ox even though that ox will never pull a plow, never serve farmers. He delights in the wild donkey that will never be tamed. He delights in mountain goats that give birth in secret places that no human being will ever see and the Leviathan (most likely the crocodile) that nobody will ever be able to eat or use for food.

God creates and cares for and gives life and food to and delights in animals that aren't good for any purpose anybody could imagine. Why would God make a world like that? Why? Because God just delights in giving! God created them to just receive His love.

The author Annie Dillard has this great statement. She says it's, "Because the Creator loves pizzazz." He revels in the beauty and goodness of the least strategic of his creatures.

There is a God over it all. He is on the upper stage, seeing over everything we cannot possibly see. He does things we cannot possibly know in our lower stage lives on earth. This God is amazingly good, uncontrollably generous, and irrationally loving. He just gives for no reason at all. It's His nature. He can't help himself. God loves pizzazz. This God is the center of the universe. He is reality. He made it all. Our reality is not reality because we are only on the lower stage. We can't see it all.

This story is your story. It's my story. In this life on this not-okay earth, you live, I live, down here on the lower stage, and we don't get to know. We don't get to see. We don't get to hear. Job finds out about something way better. He finds out who God is irrationally loving, gratuitously good, and unbelievably self-giving. That's enough. He says to this God, **"My ears had heard of You but now my eyes have seen You."** That's enough. The goodness of God and the reality of His presence are enough. In times when life is not OK, this loving God is so much bigger than the suffering we go through in our small lives down on the lower stage.

Does this uncontrollably generous personality remind you of anybody? Somebody would come centuries later, and when He would talk about God He sounded an awful lot like the God pictured in this book of Job. He'd say things like, **"Consider the lilies of the field. They neither toil nor spin. Yet I tell you that Solomon in all his glory, all of his work, all of his wealth, was not dressed like one of these little flowers of the field that nobody sees that's here today and gone tomorrow."**

Why should the lilies of the field be so beautiful? Because there's a Father that loves them, and we live in His world.

This man to come centuries later, this son of Job, would live in a not-okay world. He would suffer, although He was without sin. His death was absolutely unfair in our terms of thinking. But, when He died on the cross we can see the love of God, the love of God that is on the upper stage and reaches to all people of all times. We look at Jesus' life and we ask, "Could a human being hold on to God, faith, love, and goodness when it does not seem to pay off at all?" Jesus' life led to a cross. It appeared on the lower stage to be only a tragedy, only a waste, only a defeat. But Jesus held on, and in the upper stage His suffering brings you life, freedom, hope now and heaven to come.

Job lived in the land of NOT OK. He suffered horribly. And he held onto a God of love. He, and Jesus Christ, are living proof.

In the end, the final chapter of the book of Job ends with an odd conclusion. It's very significant. We're told... **"The LORD blessed the latter part of Job's life more than the former part. He had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen and a thousand donkeys. And he also had seven sons and three daughters. The first daughter he named Jemimah, the second Keziah and the third Keren-Happuch. Nowhere in all the land were there found women as beautiful as Job's daughters, and their father granted them an inheritance along with their brothers."**

Now that seems kind of strange. There is something going on here that we would tend to miss but that would jump immediately out for ancient readers in that day. The writer does not tell us the names of Job's seven sons, but he gives us the names of Job's daughters. In Hebrew genealogies, that was unheard of. That was unprecedented. That screams out for an explanation.

Not just that, he gives us the girls' names, and they're strange names. Generally, Hebrew names are very serious. They express character, they express virtue, or they're used to express some really important kind of theological truth or what it is God is up to. These three names are all about beauty. They're almost silly names. *Jemimah* meant dove. That was the picture of a bird that was considered exceptionally lovely.

*Keziah* is the Hebrew word for cinnamon, for prized spice. Does anybody here like Cinnabons? Cinnabon is one of the greatest proofs to the existence of God that a person can know of. They are amazing. *Keren-Happuch* means horn of shadow. Job named that girl after makeup. It would be like naming your daughter Revlon, Maybelline, or L'Ore'al.

Not only that, he gives them each an inheritance. In the ancient world, what you gave to your sons would take care of you in your old age. It was like a 401(k). A father with seven sons would never give an inheritance, his stuff, to his daughters because that stuff would go to the in-law side of the family. Sons were financially strategic; daughters were not. You'd just be blowing that money.

Why does the writer include this? What's Job doing? He includes it because now Job delights in and gives to the least strategic creatures. Job has changed. He has become uncontrollably generous, and irrationally loving. He gives for no reason at all when he cannot possibly profit or gain by it. He has discovered God's character, God's personality through his time of suffering. And now Job is changed to become much more like God.

Job could not see the upper stage. Job did not know his faithfulness had meaning beyond his wildest dreams. He did not know something cosmic, eternal, vast, and magnificent was at stake in his little life. Job's faithfulness in suffering was being used by God to demonstrate God's whole, wild adventure and His amazing love.

His honesty and perseverance have been used now for thousands of years to inspire billions of people who live in the land of Uz. "Hang on. Keep going. Don't let go. Don't give up. You have no idea. God is so close. God is so good." The writer wants to say that not just to Job; he wants to say it to you. He wants us to say it to each other. He wants us to hear it for ourselves.

We live in the land of Uz. We live (and this is what we'll be talking about in this series) in the land of anxiety, fear, failure, divorce, relational breakdown, confusion, and hurt. We all do. Why? I don't know. How long will it last? I don't know. Does your response matter? More than you can possibly dream.