



When I was in college I was often overwhelmed by the amount of reading we were assigned. In Humanities class, for instance, we had about a week to read *Crime and Punishment*, which seemed to me about 50,000 pages long. Some years after finishing school, I decided to go back and read some of those books assigned in college that I either didn't finish or never started, which was most of them, and I found many of them to be very interesting and insightful. One of the books we were assigned was Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, which set a template for books about a dystopian future, such as *Divergent* and *The Hunger Games*, if you have read any of those.

*Brave New World* is fascinating in several ways, but mostly because of the way in which it portrays a world of the future, which is as a place where all suffering is absent. The world of the future, in Huxley's novel, was portrayed as a place where every person would have everything they need, everything they wanted, and are always satisfied and always comfortable. What is especially interesting is that Huxley paints such a world not as ideal, but as a very bleak place. In Huxley's future world we see not a utopia, but a place that is bleak and undesirable. The novel raises some interesting questions, such as *can we truly appreciate companionship if we have never known loneliness? Can we truly appreciate bounty if we have never been in need? Can we truly appreciate love if we have never felt unloved? Can life be as rich and as meaningful if we have not known suffering and difficulty?*

This morning we begin a series of four messages from the book of Job, a book that leads us to think very deeply and carefully about the difficulties and the suffering we experience in life. As we journey through this series I should note that this is not the first time we have studied the topic of suffering. I return to this topic every few years for a couple of reasons – first, because I am continually asked about the question of suffering. Of all the Biblical, spiritual, and theological questions I am asked, I am most often asked variations of the same question, and that question is *why do people – especially good people – suffer?* And, second, we return to the book of Job because people are constantly in the midst of suffering, and Job offers some very helpful words of wisdom. You are in one of three places in regard to suffering this morning – you *have suffered* in the past, and you are perhaps still dealing with the consequences of that suffering; you *are now* enduring a time of suffering; or you *will* suffer.

The book of Job asks us to confront one of the most difficult aspects of what it means to be human – that we will struggle and suffer – and Job gives us an interesting view of that suffering and those struggles. And though on the surface the book of Job doesn't appear to give us many specific answers, I believe that when we dig a bit deeper we find there are some very important answers contained in his story.

The book of Job is not an easy study, as we will see, and some of what it has to tell us is tough to hear. Not everything in these messages will be easy to hear or consider, but if I said that your life would always be great and always be wonderful I would be lying to you, and I don't want to lie to you, and I don't think you want me to lie to you.

Our text for this morning is the first twelve verses of chapter one of Job. I encourage you to take time in the coming days and weeks to read through the entire book of Job, especially if you have never done so.

Job1:1-12 –

*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.*

*2 He had seven sons and three daughters,*

*3 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.*

*4 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.*

*5 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.*

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

*7 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."*

*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."*

*9 "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 now stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face."*

*12 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." Then Satan went out from the presence of the Lord.*

That's an interesting setting, isn't it? The book of Job is a lengthy book and we are spending only four weeks on it, so there are a lot of things contained in the book of Job, such as this opening setting, that we will not have time to consider.

There are, to begin with, three basic sources of suffering –

Suffering as a consequence of our own actions.

Suffering as a consequence of the actions of others.

Suffering as a consequence of...we don't really know what. This category catches all the other causes of suffering, many of which we do not understand.

Job did not suffer as a result of anything he did or as a result of anything done by anyone else. Job's suffering was a test, and the test that Job faced was one that would reveal whether or not his faith was real or just a product of his blessed life. In their conversation about Job, Satan (or, as we would find in the Hebrew language, *the satan*, which means *the accuser* or *the adversary*) says to God, *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* (verses 10 – 11). That’s an interesting test. What happens to our faith when it is tested by adversity? Will our faith withstand the test – the adversity – or will it wither and die?

Here are some lessons to remember, lessons that we learn from Job and his experience –

*Suffering is not always a negative, even though we see it is as one.*

Sometimes we hear the phrase *entitlement mentality* bandied about in our culture. *Entitlement mentality* is a phrase generally used to critique people, but here’s the truth – we all feel entitled. Who doesn’t think *I’m a good person. I try to help others. I work hard and take care of my family. I do what is right. I’ve not hurt anyone. Why should I, then, have to suffer? Shouldn’t I be exempt from suffering and hardship, because of my goodness?* Well, no, because that is not how life works. We might feel entitled to a blessed life that is free of tragedy and suffering, but we will not be exempt, and it’s a sign of our tremendously blessed lives that we have come to think life should be free of difficulty. And don’t get me wrong; I wish life could always be filled with blessing and be free of tragedy and suffering, but that is just not going to happen. There is no hedge of protection we can build around our lives that will save us from the difficulties of life, and the Bible does not guarantee a trouble-free life. Somehow, a lot of people have the idea that the Bible does promise a trouble-free life (and that is one of my primary contentions with the so-called *prosperity gospel*, but that is a topic for another time). Just a cursory reading of the Bible reveals that difficulty and struggle are a part of life. Job, for instance, did everything right. He left nothing to chance, even offering sacrifices on behalf of his children in the event they had done something wrong. So why should Job have to be subjected to suffering? And, more importantly, what would be his response?

What Job has to teach us – even though it seems counter-intuitive – is that *suffering is not always a negative, even though we see it is as one*. The theologian Barbara Brown Taylor writes, in an April 28, 2014 cover article of *Time* magazine, of the importance – even the necessity – of struggle, writing that *contemporary spirituality is too feel-good, that darkness holds more lessons than light and that contrary to what many of us have long believed, it is sometimes in the bleakest void that God is nearest* (page 38).

My generation, the Baby Boomer generation, has often committed a very unfortunate error, and it is this – when our parents or grandparents talked about their experiences in the Great Depression, we rolled our eyes. It’s true, isn’t it? We rolled our eyes and made jokes about the stories we were going to hear once again. Why did we do that? We should instead have admired and sought to emulate the great strength and character of that generation. The sufferings and difficulties they endured produced in them a strength of faith and character they have modeled throughout their lives, and it is a strength of faith and character that is not as strong, I fear, in subsequent generations. That generation learned that through suffering and struggle we are shaped in very important ways – positive ways, especially – because it true what we read in I Peter 1:1-7 (part of today’s Call to Worship) – *In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.*

Struggles are also helpful in that they plant hope within us, and hope is an absolute necessity in life. I find hope in all manner of places, even in somewhere as simple as the mailbox. For some reason, I look forward to going to the mailbox every day. Does anybody else get excited about going to the mailbox? Since I was young, I have always been excited about getting the mail. Our house was a long way from the road (about 100 or 150 yards), and I remember in the summer, at this time of year, I enjoyed the long walk up our dusty driveway to the mailbox. On a hot summer day, I would meander up the driveway, maybe stopping at the apple tree a little past halfway for a snack, and then on to the mailbox. Why that was exciting to me, I don’t know, because I wasn’t receiving any mail back then. But I had hope, hope there would be something there for me when I opened the mailbox. Even though

we don't receive mail today, on Sunday, when I pull in our driveway when I get home I will feel the urge to check the mailbox. I don't know why I have this hopeful feeling about the mail, because it's almost exclusively junk mail, bills, and piles of credit card offers, but I always have hope. Maybe tomorrow will be the day that somehow, some great news will arrive in the mail. Or, even better, I'll open the mailbox and find a big check waiting on me. I have absolutely no idea why I would expect to get a big check in the mail, but there's always hope.

Weddings are certainly declarations of hope. A wedding is a declaration of hope that two people can build a life together, build a home and family, and help one another navigate and survive the struggles and difficulties that come their way. I've done a lot of weddings over the years, and one my favorites was a wedding for the oldest couple I've married. I have a picture of Thelma and Bill in my office, taken on the day of their wedding, when they were 89 and 87 years old. I love their story because they had some Job-like moments in their lives. Thelma and Bill first met as students years ago at Georgetown College. They dated a few times but after graduating life took them in different directions. They both met other people whom they married and the years went by. Thelma and her husband, many years ago, were coming home from a trip to Florida and stopped at a rest area to stretch their legs. As Thelma's husband was walking he was struck by a car and killed. Thelma's loss was devastating but she was sustained by faith and the love of family and friends. Bill had also experienced loss, as his wife passed away and he was alone for years. Then, late in their lives, Bill and Thelma met again at a college reunion, they started dating, and were married. I doubt that they ever could have expected they would get married in their late 80s, but one day a small group of us gathered and were blessed by this beautiful experience of their late-in-life wedding. They had about two years together before Bill passed away, and not many months after Bill's passing I officiated at Thelma's funeral. I had known Thelma much longer than I did Bill, but I was greatly touched by both of their lives. After all the ups and downs of life they found so much joy and happiness. It was a great ending to the story of their lives, and a wonderful story of hope.

I will go ahead and tell you that the story of Job has a happy ending, as Job held to his faith. The adversity that Job faced did not crush his faith, but made it stronger. This is one of the truths of suffering. Suffering will produce one of two results in regards to faith – either the weakening of faith or the strengthening of faith. For Job, the happy ending did not minimize the pain of his loss, just as the happiness that Thelma and Bill found didn't minimize the difficulties and losses they had suffered over the years, but though suffering and hardship is going to happen, the good news is that it does not have to break us, it does not have to bring us to despair, and it does not have the final word in our lives. This, God has promised.

*Struggle brings a focus and clarity to life that is not present in times of blessing.*

Philip Yancey has written numerous books, many of which I have read and found very helpful. Yancey says that one of the lessons of suffering is that *suffering actually gives us the opportunity to focus on what matters most*. Yancey learned that lesson through his own suffering. He was involved in a very serious car accident, where his neck was broken, and as a result of that fracture Yancey's doctors initially feared that a bone fragment had pierced a major artery, which, if true, meant he only had a few minutes to live. During the time the doctors were trying to determine whether or not the artery was severed, Yancey said he could only think of three questions worth contemplating – *Who do I love? What have I done with my life? Am I ready for whatever is next?* It was a moment of extreme clarity, and it is powerful to think, isn't it, that tragedy or suffering can waken us to some realities that we might not otherwise consider. Suffering can bring a moment of such clarity that we will suddenly take away that grudge we have held against someone for so long. It will allow us to offer forgiveness we have withheld or ask for the forgiveness we need. It will allow us to let go of bitterness that has poisoned our soul. It will allow our hearts to awaken to love in a way we had previously not allowed. It will allow us

to see our family, our friends, our blessings, and all the good things in our lives in a deeper and richer way.

There is something about living in blessing that simply does not provide us with the sense of clarity and focus that comes in a time of suffering. Again, I would not wish suffering upon anyone, but I very firmly believe that we need those moments of clarity and focus.

*Don't be broken by suffering.*

A number of years ago I had a conversation with a man who had experienced some very difficult losses. I spoke to him shortly after officiating at the funeral of his 41-year-old son. Not too many months before I had officiated at the funeral of his wife, the second time he had experienced such a loss. He was a good man, and he was really struggling with his grief, and the anger that came from his grief, an anger which in that moment overwhelmed him. He quoted Matthew 7:9, where Jesus says "*which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone?*" That verse was part of our Call to Worship last Sunday, and they are a reminder of God's goodness, love, and care. That father was having a difficult time accepting such a promise in that moment, and he looked at me, with tears in his eyes, and speaking from a broken heart said, *all God has given me is a bag of rocks.*

What do you say in such a moment? Elisabeth Kubler-Ross taught us in her landmark book, *On Death and Dying*, that there are stages to grief, one of which is anger. We cannot deny that anger and it is not wrong to express it, even at God. This man was right to be hurt, and to be angry, as he had experienced such heartbreaking loss. He was a good man who lived well, but his good life did not insulate him from the harsh reality of burying two wives and a son. And he was understandably angry, and he needed to express that anger rather than hold it in, lest it poison his soul. Job was hurt and angry as well. Job was also a good man, but his good life did not insulate him from suffering. But we cannot – we must now – live forever in our anger and are hurt. Here is a harsh reality – whatever goodness is in my life – or yours – it will not insulate you, or me, from suffering, which will come. I don't say that to discourage you or to send you out of here today saying, *wow, Dave was a real downer today, wasn't he?* I say that as a reminder that when suffering and difficulty comes, it need not – it must not – break us. Job could not understand why he had experienced such tragedy and loss. That is an understandable reaction, but here is an important truth – even though we all, at some point, live in a place of heartbreak and even anger, we cannot stay there. We cannot allow the difficulty of suffering to break us.

I spent yesterday in jail. My band was part of an event at the jail in Jeffersonville, Indiana. We were there, all day, to play music for the men and women and to have a time of ministry with them. I have participated in many prison ministry events over the years, as I believe it is one of the important works Jesus calls us to do, and there are always some remarkable moments that take place. One of those moments yesterday was in realizing how many of those involved in the ministry event had previously been incarcerated, some of them in that prison. Both chaplains who helped to organize the event were recovering addicts and former prisoners. One of them remarked that at one point in his life he couldn't wait to get out of that jail and there he was, spending most of his days working in that jail. Many of those who were there to minister were also recovering alcoholics and addicts and were sharing how long they had been clean and sober. When asked how long they had been clean and sober, various answers were offered – *I've been clean for 8 years! I've been clean for 15 years! I've been clean over 20 years!* Someone asked me, *Dave, how long have you been clean and sober?* My reply was, *61 years next month!* (FYI – I will be 61 years old next month, and have always been clean and sober, just in case you wondered). A young man who played in one of the other bands had a powerful story to share. He was, I would say, in this late 20s, and he told the residents, *I've been where you are. I met Jesus in solitary confinement just down the road, in the prison in New Albany. He did not have to find me, because he was there with me, but I found him. I got down on my knees in the cell and asked him to save me.* I'm telling you, that was a powerful moment, and he had the attention of his audience. The message we all

shared yesterday was this – *no walls can keep you away from God. These walls of concrete and steel cannot keep God out. God is here with you, and he loves you. But it's not just walls of concrete and steel that we must deal with. We erect spiritual, psychological, and emotional walls, and they are walls that can keep others out, but they do not keep God out of our lives. Whoever we are, wherever we are, God loves us. Whatever has happened to us in life, whatever suffering and hardship we have experienced, God loves us and cares about us.*

When it comes to our suffering and our difficulties, we often ask *why*? I would say that *why* is the wrong question to ask. I think we need to ask questions that begin with other words, such as *what* – *what will we do with and learn from our struggles and our sufferings?* And *who will we turn to that can, and will, lift us back up again?*

Whatever you are carrying around because of your suffering, whatever hurt or bitterness there might be...don't let it break you!