



My mom and dad never said so, but I suspect they believed something about my siblings and me. Actually, there were times when they probably believed a lot of things about my siblings and me, and not all of them positive! But one of the things I imagine they believed about us was the difference between our experiences as children and theirs, specifically, that we had it rather easy, and I wonder if they worried that we might not be prepared for the struggles of life because we did not suffer difficulties. I did not suffer want as a child. I did not suffer loss. I did not suffer hardship to any great degree, but my parents did. My dad was nine years old when his father passed away, and that was difficult enough but was made more difficult when his father's family tried to take him and brother and sister away from their mother. My mom, as I've told you before, was adopted as an infant by her aunt, who was a widow already struggling to raise eight children on her own. My parents faced a lot of struggle as they grew up, and I believe their struggles made them stronger emotionally, spiritually, and in many other ways. I believe their experiences, and those of their generation, provided lessons that enabled them to manage the difficulties in life that come their way, and I worry that my generation – and succeeding generations – often find ourselves ill-equipped for the difficulties because our lives were (on the whole) relatively easy.

As we continue our series of messages from the book of Job, which we will conclude next week, I have noted that Job's story is greatly lacking in cheerful content. There are many other books of the Bible that make plain the struggles of life, but they have upbeat passages that balance out the plain talk about life's difficulties. The book of Philippians, written by Paul as he awaited execution, has a tone of great joy in spite of the difficult circumstances in which he wrote. The psalms have some very difficult to read passages, such as 22:1, where David cries out *my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* (Job could have also said those words, but, interestingly, he did not). The psalms have, however, many beautiful and upbeat passages that outnumber the difficult ones. The book of Job is a relentless drumbeat of his difficulties, and it is tough and difficult to read because it reminds us that life is so often tough and difficult, and we cannot be in denial of that fact.

Job asks a lot of questions, and as he did so he also spent a good deal of time defending himself against the accusations of his friends. As he did so, it is obvious that Job was in great despair, and he certainly must have felt like giving up at some point, even on life itself. But, interestingly, Job never questioned his faith, or the idea of faith. No matter how painful his loss, no matter how deep his grief, no matter how alone he felt, Job held to his faith, revealing that faith is indeed one of the great resources that helps us face our difficulties.

So let's read our Scripture text for this morning, a passage where we hear the pain and struggle of Job, a passage where he speaks to his three friends out of his despair and out of the hurt of their accusations, but ends with Job making an amazing declaration.

Job 13:1-15 –

- 1 *My eyes have seen all this, my ears have heard and understood it.*
- 2 *What you know, I also know; I am not inferior to you.*
- 3 *But I desire to speak to the Almighty and to argue my case with God.*
- 4 *You, however, smear me with lies; you are worthless physicians, all of you!*
- 5 *If only you would be altogether silent! For you, that would be wisdom.*
- 6 *Hear now my argument; listen to the pleas of my lips.*
- 7 *Will you speak wickedly on God's behalf? Will you speak deceitfully for him?*
- 8 *Will you show him partiality? Will you argue the case for God?*
- 9 *Would it turn out well if he examined you? Could you deceive him as you might deceive a mortal?*
- 10 *He would surely call you to account if you secretly showed partiality.*
- 11 *Would not his splendor terrify you? Would not the dread of him fall on you?*
- 12 *Your maxims are proverbs of ashes; your defenses are defenses of clay.*
- 13 *"Keep silent and let me speak; then let come to me what may.*
- 14 *Why do I put myself in jeopardy and take my life in my hands?*
- 15 *Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him. I will surely defend my ways to his face.*

Isn't that an amazing declaration Job makes at the end – *Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him.* Allow me, this morning, to ask a few questions, the first of which is –

What Will We Do With Our Suffering?

I don't know where I first heard the story, but a young lady came home from school one day very upset. She had done poorly on a test and had an argument with a friend. Across her test she had written the words *this is the worst day of my life* and slammed it down on the kitchen table. Her mother picked up the paper and wrote underneath her daughter's words, *I hope and pray this is the worst day of your life.* She then had it framed, wrapped it up, and presented it to her daughter. Not to minimize what any young person experiences, but if those kinds of disappointments constitute the biggest problems we face in life, it would be a very blessed life. I guess it would be a blessed life, but perhaps we are not blessed when we escape suffering, because suffering is one of life's greatest classrooms and those sufferings teach us some of life's most important lessons. Our sufferings can teach us compassion and can build within us a strength of faith that might come to us in no other way.

For some, however, the suffering becomes unimaginable. Eli Weisel is the author of the book *Darkness*, which is his account of surviving the Nazi concentration camps of Auschwitz and Buchenwald. The title of *Darkness* symbolizes his belief that he lived in a world without God's presence, and also of his belief that God does not exist. Along with members of his family, his faith died in the concentration camps. I have not read all of his book, *Darkness*, but I have read some of it, and it is incredibly difficult to read, so much so that of the few passages I considered sharing I decided not to do so. The suffering he and so many others experienced can keep one up at night wondering how people can be so cruel to one another. It can also make one wonder, *would my faith survive such an experience? Is there a limit to what my faith could endure?* Suffering, I said at the beginning of this series of messages, does one of two things in relation to faith – it strengthens faith, or it weakens faith. More than one person has abandoned faith when experiencing suffering, while many others have

found their faith strengthened through suffering. That we will suffer is an unavoidable truth of life. What we do with that suffering, however, is up to us.

There are some people who truly earn the right to speak their mind, and Job earned that right. Job, as one who lost everything dear to him in life, had a right to speak his mind. And he did. He speaks against his friends, he asserts his desire to plead his case before God, and most impressively, Job finishes this deeply emotional speech by affirming his faith in God, even to say that *though he slay me, yet will I hope in him*. How does one manage to get to the point of such a deep and abiding faith? And, are we able to follow the example of Job and pass the test of faith when life is coming apart around us? The question is not whether or not we will face difficulty, or even how much difficulty we will face, but what will we do with that difficulty? How will we respond to that difficulty? Will that difficulty break us, or will it strengthen us?

Job doesn't provide us with a list of answers as to how we should respond to our sufferings in life. In one way, the book of Job reminds me of a college classmate of mine who actually wrote in his exam book one day *I know I haven't written the answer to the question but you have to trust that I do know the answer – I really do!* That didn't work out very well for him, but the book of Job gives that kind of answer. It's not a specific answer to every difficult situation in life and there is no list offered of what you should do when you face difficulty in life. But Job still gives an answer, and it's an answer that doesn't, on the surface at least, sound like an answer, but his answer is, *though he slay me, yet will I hope in him*.

What will we do with our suffering? Will we feed the bitterness, anger, and hurt that it can bring, or will it become a seed out of which something new and even beautiful can grow?

2. *Why Did Job Remain Faithful?*

Some of the greatest beauty comes out of our suffering. Christian Wiman has written a fascinating book titled *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of A Modern Believer*. I like the way he puts those two words together – *Bright Abyss*. He was 39 years old, and married less than a year, when he received a diagnosis of incurable cancer. One of the very interesting comments he makes is that *one speaks differently when standing on a cliff*. His illness completely transformed his life, and the major transformation was that it brought life to what he calls *a long, dormant faith*. The resurrection of faith in his life came about because of struggle. Struggle caused him to walk to, and embrace, faith.

Why did Job remain faithful? I think that is a question well worth asking. Why didn't Job, after so much suffering, simply throw in the towel on faith? What drives people to continue to have faith in the midst of deep and profound suffering? And why do some walk away from faith in the midst of their suffering? Biblical character after Biblical character demonstrated their willingness to hold onto faith in spite of the sufferings they encounter; in fact, they found that suffering deepened their faith. Listen, for instance, to Paul in II Corinthians 11:23-28 – *I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. 24 Five times I received...the forty lashes minus one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, 26 I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. 27 I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. 28 Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.* What would compel Paul to continue in the face of such incredibly difficult circumstances? The answer is, faith.

But it wasn't only Paul. Peter and others were beaten and imprisoned for their faith (a few examples are Acts 5:19 – *They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail.* Acts 5:40 – *They called the apostles in and had them flogged.* Stephen being martyred, in Acts 7:54–60 – *54 When the members of*

the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. 55 But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." 57 At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, 58 dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep). Around the world today the suffering and persecution continues, and so does faith. The Khai Khat family, for instance, whom we helped to settle in this country, fled their country because of persecution. When we met them at the airport they each had one suitcase to begin their new lives. Imagine, starting your life over, in a new land, and with only a single suitcase to carry your possessions and clothing! And yet they maintain a vibrant faith!

3. *Will we say with Job, "though he slay me, yet will I hope in him"?*

The movie *The Truman Show* has a fascinating concept, where Jim Carrey plays the character of Truman, a man who is the subject of a reality TV show, although he does not know that his entire life has been the subject of the show or that the idyllic community in which he lives is actually the set of the TV show. He life is one of predictable routine and is free from trouble. In spite of his good life and in spite of living in such a beautiful community, Truman senses there is more to life and to the world than what he knows. He finally decides he needs to strike out into the larger world, although the creator of the TV show knows this would be a disaster for the program. As Truman boards a small sailboat and sets off for the mainland, the creator of the show orders his staff to create a storm, in the hopes it will cause Truman to turn back. Truman, however, keeps going, although he almost drowns when his boat capsizes. Eventually, Truman runs into the end of the set, where his small boat hits the wall that marks the outer edge of the giant set on which the show takes place. Truman climbs a small set of stairs and places his hand on a doorknob, ready to open it and to walk out of the safety and security he had always known and into the harshness of reality. At that point the show's creator speaks to Truman from high up in the control room. He entreats Truman not to leave, saying that *in my world you have nothing to fear*. And that is true. Truman could stay in his beautiful, fear-free world, but he chooses to leave and enter into the real world, where there is sadness, heartache, and suffering. Why would anyone leave such a idyllic setting? Why not stay where life exists in a protective bubble?

Job asks us a question, and it is the question of whether or not we want to live in a protective bubble or in the real world. It would be wonderful, at least on the surface, to live in an idyllic world like Truman's, but wouldn't we miss much of the richness of life if we did? The great irony of life is that without our struggles and difficulties we would not know so much of the beauty of life. If we never suffer loss we would not know the beauty of a friend who sits and mourns our loss with us. If we never know disappointment in life we never know the joy of the sweet and good moments of life. And on and on we could go, in terms of other examples.

Yes, life is difficult, and there is much sadness and struggle that we experience. But in the face of all that comes our way, may we, like Job, pass the test of faith, and say with him, *though he slay me, yet will I hope in him!*