

## **When Life Is Unfair: The Story of Job**

### **DESCRIPTION**

This seven-week series explores significant themes from the book of Job. However, one of the sermons is a free bonus message, so you only get charged for six sermons.

1. Job's Strength (Job 1:13-21, 2 Corinthians 4:8-9)
2. Job's Faith (Job 10: 1-8, 16-17)
3. Job's Question (Job 3: 1, 11-26)
4. Job's Pain (Job 19:25-26)
5. Job's Friends (Job 3:11-4:1)
6. Job's Flaw (Job 29:7-20, free bonus sermon)
7. Job's Recovery Job 42:10-17)

**When Life Is Unfair: The Story of Job**  
**Part 1 - Job's Strength**  
***Job 1:13-21, 2 Corinthians 4:8-9***

Years ago, a Jewish Rabbi named Harold Kushner wrote a profound and bestselling book called, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. “When Bad Things Happen to Good People” is an excellent description of the book of Job. Job was an exceptionally good man. Excellent character. Deeply devoted to God. Respected throughout his community. Dedicated to his family. Constantly helped people in need. Job was a very good man—the best man in his entire community.

Although Job was a good man, some very bad things happened to him. First, he lost his wealth. Job went from affluence to bankruptcy overnight. He lost his oxen, donkeys, sheep, camels, and even his servants. In modern terms, it would be like having millions of dollars in assets wiped out in a stock market crash. Job, who had been rich, was now poor. Second, Job lost his health. He had been perfectly healthy. But then, all of a sudden, he became horribly ill. So he lost his wealth, and then he lost his health. Third, and worst of all, Job lost most of his family. All ten of his children died in a freak accident without any warning. One night he ate dinner around the table with his entire family. The next morning, ten empty chairs stood around that same table. Although Job was a good man, bad things happened to him. That's the story of Job. But that's not just Job's story. It's our story as well. Most of here today are pretty good people. Not perfect, but a pretty decent group of folks. But in spite of that, most everyone here today IS facing, HAS faced, or WILL face, serious struggles.

I see that all the time in my job. Without breaking confidences, over the past few months, I have spoken to people battling serious health problems—some life threatening. I have visited with people going through a divorce. I have spoken to people who are unemployed and dealing with all the baggage that comes with that. I have had contact with people facing serious family crisis. I have talked with people in financial turmoil. And, I have visited with folks who lost loved ones and are filled with grief. Although these people are all different and they all have unique stories, they have at least two things in common. First, they are good people—not perfect—but good. And second, bad things happened to them. Although I wish

it were not so, bad things often happen to good people. And that's what the story of Job is all about.

Which, of course, raises significant questions. We'll address some of these questions in the weeks ahead as we explore highlights from the book of Job. Questions like, why **do** bad things happen to good people? How do you maintain faith in the midst of tragedy? How do you help friends and family members who are suffering? And, how do you recover from overwhelming losses? We'll look at these and other questions in the coming weeks. But today, with the time I have left, I want to focus on just one question: When bad things happen to good people, what does God have to offer?

As we learn from Job, and lots of other good people, God does not offer us protection. God did not protect Job from suffering, and God won't protect us from suffering either. A lot of good people who love Jesus and come to church every Sunday still suffer. Good Christian people get cancer, have automobile accidents, go bankrupt, have family problems, get robbed, get raped, have miscarriages, lose jobs, and lose loved ones. God does not protect us from suffering, at least not very often. We are not immune from pain. We need to remember that at the very center of the Gospel story is a cross. Jesus, the crucified God, suffered, and so will we, at least occasionally.

Although God does not protect us from bad things, God does offer something very important for people who suffer. God comes along side of us and gives us the strength to cope. He did so for Job, and he will for us. We see that throughout the Bible, including today's NT text. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4, "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; stuck down, but not destroyed." Paul is saying, regardless of what comes, God will give us strength to cope, the grace to endure. So, when bad things happen to good people, what does God have to offer? God's presence and God's strength to cope.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, whom I mentioned earlier, learned this truth. Kushner wrote his book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, as a response to the illness and eventual death of his son Aaron. When Aaron was just a little boy, he was diagnosed with an extremely rare disease called progeria, which means rapid aging. Aaron never grew beyond three feet tall, he had no hair on his head or body, he looked like a little old man while he was still a child,

and he died in his teens. It was an agonizing experience for the whole family, and Kushner doesn't sugar coat it. He is brutally honest about the anger, the frustration, the grief, and the depression. And yet, even in that kind of suffering, Rabbi Kushner learned that God gives his children the strength to cope with whatever life brings. For the Kushner family, that strength came in two forms.

First, it came through people. God in God's grace summoned forth friends to ease the Kushner's burden. They were sustained in Aaron's illness by people who cared for them. Like the man who made Aaron a scaled-down tennis racquet suitable to his size. Or the woman who gave him a small handmade violin that was a family heirloom. Or the friend who got him a baseball autographed by the entire Red Sox team. Or the children who overlooked his appearance and physical limitations, and played stickball with him in the backyard. Rabbi Kusher said that this kind of caring was God's way of telling his family that they were not alone, not cast off. God's strength to cope, therefore, usually came through human instruments.

But the strength to cope also came directly from God. Kusher speaks again and again of God's gifts of courage and strength and hope. When Rabbi Kushner had used up all his own energy, when he was weak, tired, angry, or overwhelmed, when he reached the limits of his own strength and courage, he found reinforcement from a source outside of himself, from God himself. When he felt desperately alone, he found out he was not alone after all. God and other people were there for him—and through that he found the resiliency to go on living. Although God did not protect the Kushner family from suffering, God gave them the strength to cope with their tragedy with courage, with hope and with dignity. God enabled them to live fully, bravely, meaningfully and even joyfully—even in a less than perfect world. The closing line of Rabbi Kushner's book says: "Yesterday seems less painful, and I am not afraid of tomorrow."

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## **When Life Is Unfair (Part 2)**

### **Job's Faith (Job 10: 1-8, 16-17)**

Several years ago, I had the sad task of burying a 47 year old man named Bobby. Bobby was a faithful member of my congregation, and a personal friend. Bobby was also a beloved teacher and track coach at the public high school. One afternoon at a track meet, Bobby fell to the ground and died. The autopsy revealed that Bobby died of a rare heart disorder that killed him instantly and without warning. Bobby's wife Jayne, although she was only 44 years old, was now a widow with two sons at home.

Several months after Bobby's funeral, his wife Jayne came by the church office to see me. During the conversation Jayne said: "Martin, I'm guess I'm not a very good Christian. In spite of my prayers and faith, I can't seem to overcome my grief and get on with my life." Jayne stopped talking for a moment to dry her eyes with a Kleenex. Then she added: "Worse than that, I feel angry. Angry at Bobby for leaving me, angry at his doctor for not knowing about his heart disorder, and although I'm ashamed to admit it, I feel anger toward God." She continued: "The other night I tried to pray, but the more I prayed the madder I got. I ended up screaming at God. It scared me. It was then that I decided to talk to you." As the conversation continued, Jayne confessed that she sometimes wondered if God really cared about her. Once, on a particularly bad day, she wondered if God even existed. But then she quickly added, "Oh, I have faith in God, I really do. I couldn't have gotten this far without God. But my faith is so weak these days." Then Jayne said, "I wish ... I wish I had the faith of Job." I smiled at her and said, "Jayne, you do have the faith of Job."

Let's talk today about Job's faith. Many of us have the idea that Job never struggled with his faith, that his faith was always strong. We think that because many of us have only read the first two chapters of the book. In chapter one, Job does express remarkably strong faith. He gets the terrible news that his business interests have been decimated, his servants have been murdered, and his children have been killed. Upon hearing the news Job fell on the ground, worshipped God and said, "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (1:20). We find a similar story of resilient faith in chapter two. Job, already in deep grief, develops agonizing sores all over his body. His wife finally says to him, "Curse God, and die." Job responds, "Shall we accept good from God, but not trouble?"

(2:10). We read these stories and we think—what incredible faith Job had! As a result, we have developed a myth about the faith of Job. We think Job’s faith was always strong, never questioned, and never struggled. But that’s not the whole story about Job’s faith. If you read the remaining forty chapters of Job, you see a very different picture indeed.

The fact is, Job’s faith—like our faith—questioned, struggled, and vacillated between belief and disbelief. Job believed, then Job doubted. At times Job felt comforted by God, at other times he felt abandoned by God. Job affirmed the greatness and glory of God, but he also accused God of being cruel, unfair, and uncaring. And, as we heard in today’s text, Job also got angry at God. Job, bitter and angry at God, complains to God about his unfair treatment. He said, “God you know I’m innocent, but you destroy me anyway.” “God,” said Job, “does it please you to oppress me? Like a lion you hunt me, and you bring fresh troops against me.” In today’s text, and in many other passages in the book, Job expresses anger at God.

Job’s anger toward God reminds me of a story. A teenage boy was escorted to the hospital chaplain’s office immediately after the death of his mother. Devastated by his mother’s death, the boy felt extremely angry. On the wall in the chaplains office hung a wooden crucifix with a ceramic figure of Jesus attached to it. The boy’s eyes focused on the crucifix. The chaplain, sensitive to the young man’s hostility, said, “Do whatever you need to do.” The boy reached for the crucifix, removed it from the wall, raised it over his head, and smashed it against the floor over and over again until the ceramic figure of Jesus was broken into bits. After his destructive deed the young man collapsed on the couch next to the minister. The chaplain held the boy tightly as the young man poured out his grief in deep, powerful, and unrestrained sobs.

Now that boy didn’t hate God. But at the moment he was angry at God. And so was Job. And Job expressed his anger, along with his pain, questions and doubts. But—and this is crucial—Job also expressed his faith. Even in his suffering and pain and anger, Job was a person of faith. Even when he was in agony and wanted to die, he affirmed faith in God. Even when he hurt at the core of his soul, he worshipped God. Even when he was deeply disappointed in God, Job cried out in faith in chapter 19, “I know that my Redeemer lives” (19: 25). And, in chapter 13 Job said, “Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him” (13:15 NIV).

You see, authentic faith isn't always strong. Sometimes it doubts and questions and struggles. But it does not quit believing. Real faith—the faith of Job—stays alive even in the midst of struggle and despair. It's the kind of faith Jesus had when he was dying on the cross. Like Job, Jesus felt abandoned by God. While hanging on the cross Jesus cried out in despair, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" And yet, a few moments later, Jesus was able to say, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Faith in the midst of suffering and struggle and crisis—that's true faith.

Job's faith—faith in spite of doubts and questions and struggles—reminds me of the faith of many Holocaust survivors. Although some Jews lost their faith during the Holocaust, most did not. As Howard Burkle said, "They [the Jews] continued to believe in God whether or not they could find good reasons for doing so." That's the faith of Job. And that is faith at its most mature and authentic level.

Several years ago, Ellie Wiesel, a survivor of the Holocaust, was interviewed on public television. Wiesel was just fourteen years old when he and his family were taken to a Nazi concentration camp. His story of the Holocaust is an awful story—a nightmare beyond belief. In this television interview, Wiesel recalls a vivid experience at the concentration camp. A group of men in his barracks decided to have a trial. However, this was unlike any trial you've ever heard of before. These men decided to try God for the horrors of the Holocaust. They had been men of faith, but their faith had profoundly disappointed them. So, they decided to put God on trial for abandoning the Jewish people. Young Wiesel was asked to witness the proceedings. The charges were brought, the prosecutor listed them one by one. God's people had been torn from their homes, separated from their family, beaten, abused, murdered, and burned in incinerators. A defense was attempted, but in the end God was found guilty—guilty of abandoning his people, maybe even guilty of not existing. When the trial was over a dark and profound silence fell upon the room. A few moments later the men realized that it was time for the sacred ritual of evening prayer. At this point in the story, Wiesel recounts a remarkable fact. These men who had just found God guilty of abandoning them—these same men got down on their knees, and they began to pray their evening prayer.

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**When Life Is Unfair (Part 3)**  
**Part 3 - Job's Question**  
*Job 3: 1, 11-26*

A few years ago I read an article by a retired pastor. In the article he told about the very first question he ever received in pastoral ministry, and the very last question he received as a pastor. The first question came during the first week of his first pastorate. A young couple in his church had an automobile accident which severely injured their young child. The child died the next day. As he visited with the family immediately after the child's death, the young mother asked, "Why didn't God let my child live?" The last question this pastor received came 40 years later, during the last week of his last pastorate. He was visiting an elderly woman in the nursing home who suffered from dementia and other major medical problems. Her son was with her. After the visit, out in the hallway, the son talked to this pastor about his mother's long illness and suffering. He then asked the pastor, "Why doesn't God let my mother die?" (Pause) "Why didn't God let my child live?" "Why doesn't God let my mother die?" And in between that first and last question were a thousand other why questions. Why did my wife leave me? Why did I get cancer? Why didn't I get a promotion? Why won't my depression go away? Why \_\_\_\_\_? You fill in the blank.

We all have our why questions. And so did Job. After losing his wealth, his health, and his children, Job wanted to know why. He was a good man—honest, moral, caring, and faithful to God. So why did he suffer so? He asked this question to his friends, to himself, and even to God. That same question has been asked by millions of people through the centuries—why do bad things happen to good people? Today we are going to see how Job's question was answered. Please turn to your listening guide in the order of worship. (You can find the listening guide at the end of this sermon). I should note that today's sermon is what I call a teaching sermon, which is just another way of saying a longer sermon! Please look at question number one in your guide: **Why** Am I Suffering? By the way we'll spend almost all our time on question no. 1, and only a moment on no. 2 and no. 3, so don't get overly concerned by the clock.

1. Why Am I Suffering? Let's look first at 1A, Job's friends answer. Their answer was—it's **Job's fault**. They said, Job, you are suffering *because you have sinned*. (See text). Of course,



that's true some of the time. Sometimes our sin results in suffering. We smoke two packs of cigarettes a day for 30 years, we get heart disease or cancer or emphysema, and we suffer, as does our family. Or we get drunk, get behind the wheel of a car, and kill ourselves or someone else. Sometimes we suffer because of our sin, or because of somebody else's sin. For example, a lot of people have suffered over the past decade due to the horrible sin of terrorism. Sin often causes suffering. But a lot of times, that's an inadequate answer. It was inadequate for Job. Sin did not cause his children to die, his body to get sick, and his business to fail. Sin doesn't cause kids to get leukemia, or tornadoes to strike, or earthquakes to destroy. Still, the idea that our sin is the cause of our suffering is a popular theological concept.

I once read about an eleven-year-old boy. He and his friends found a copy of a *Playboy* magazine. With a sense that they were doing something naughty, they spent several minutes looking at the pictures. A few days later, this boy was given a routine eye exam. He was found to be nearsighted and needed glasses. This deeply upset the boy, which puzzled his parents. Finally, a few days later, when his mother was putting him to bed, he confided in her about the *Playboy* magazine and he told her his great fear. He believed that God had begun the process of making him go blind for looking at those pictures. She had to explain that God didn't blind eleven-year-old boys for looking at pictures of naked women. Good thing or there would be a lot of blind boys in the world! Sadly, it's not just children who have such silly ideas. Many grownups have the idea that suffering is a direct result of sin. I've talked to numerous adults in emergency room waiting rooms who were waiting word about a child or spouse, and they have said to me, "I must have done something bad to cause this to happen." That's what Job's friends believed. But they were wrong. In Job's case, sin did not bring about Job's suffering. Job's friends answer was, and still is—inadequate.

Well, Job had his own answer to the question, why am I suffering? See 1 B in your guide. Job's answer was, It's **God's fault**. Job believed his suffering was a *direct act of God*. (See text). The idea that God causes bad things to happen to people is very popular. But Job's answer, like his friend's answer, is also inadequate. Now don't get me wrong. God can do whatever God wants to do, including inflicting suffering. But we need to be very careful about blaming God for bad things. Let me give you just one example. When I was a teenager, my friend Van was killed in a car wreck. Van was a wonderful young man, a deeply committed Christian, and he planned to become a pastor. At his funeral, the preacher said, "Although

we can't understand it, God's will has been done." I was furious! God didn't kill Van. A drunk driver did.

Let me tell you a pet peeve of mine. When people are killed in tornadoes or earthquakes, many people call it an "act of God." Do you really believe that? When a tornado rips through a trailer park and wipes out 20 trailers killing several people, including little children, do you believe that is an act of God? I totally reject that understanding. God doesn't go around killing people with tornadoes and earthquakes and cancer and automobile accidents. God doesn't have a weekly quota of tumors to distribute, or heart attacks and strokes to pass out. How could you worship a God like that? How could you love and serve a God who does such things? The God of Jesus Christ doesn't zap people down with cancer or heart disease or car wrecks or financial crisis or marital strife or family crisis, nor does he create the wars that hurt and kill so many people.

So why did Job suffer? His friends said it was Job's fault, that he had sinned. Job said it was God's fault. Both answers are inadequate. Neither Job's sin, nor God, caused Job to suffer. So, let's look at a third answer. See 1 C. on your guide—Job's editor's answer. You need to know that most scholars believe the first part of the book of Job was a later addition by an editor. The editor took the ancient story of Job and added a prologue to set up the story. Well, the editor of the book of Job said, It's ***Satan's fault***.

In the editor's opinion, Job's suffering was an act of Satan. (See text). I don't pretend to have all the answers here. The Bible is very unclear on this subject, there is much mystery around this. However, evil is very real in our world, and it seems bigger than just human sin. Therefore, we must take evil and Satan very seriously. However, we need to be careful here. If Job's editor is right, and Satan caused Job's suffering, it raises some serious theological problems.

In this story, God and Satan made a bet with each other. God brags to Satan about how good and faithful Job is. Satan said to God, "The only reason Job is so good and faithful is that he's got it made. I bet you, that if you take away the good things in his life, Job won't be faithful anymore." So God takes up the devil on his bet, and God allows Satan to do some horrible things. God allows Satan to kill Job's innocent servants, and to kill Job's innocent animals, and God even allows Satan to kill Job's ten innocent children—just to win a bet. I don't think

that's the kind of theology we want to affirm. This is a good example of the danger of taking everything in the Bible literally. I take the Bible extremely seriously, but I don't always take it literally. You can certainly disagree with me here, but I don't think God allowed innocent animals and innocent servants and innocent children to be murdered, just to win a bet with the devil. Well, much more could be said about this, but the point today is—saying that Job's suffering is Satan's fault is an inadequate answer to Job's question.

So why did Job suffer? Why do bad things happen to good people? We've seen three answers so far. Job's friends said it was Job's fault, that his sin caused his suffering. Job said it was God's fault. The editor of the book said it was Satan's fault. All three answers have some truth to them. But all three, in the end, are inadequate answers. So let's look at 1 D on your guide—God's answer.

For thousands of years, people have wrestled with Job's question—why do good people suffer? So what is God's answer to that question? Are you ready to fill in the blank? Are you ready for the definitive answer to the great theological question of all time? Well, I hate to break it to you, but God does not answer that question! So, you'll just have to leave that line blank! It drives a lot of people nuts, but God did not answer Job's question. It would have been a great opportunity for God to answer the question. But God did not. I don't know why God did not answer Job. I'm sure one reason is that our puny little brains cannot begin to understand the deep mysteries of life and death and suffering. But whatever his reasons, God did not answer Job's question. Instead, God asked Job some questions, and we'll look at that another day.

So we are right back where we started from. Why did Job suffer? Why do bad things happen to good people? The honest truth is that there is no final answer. There is no complete, convincing, simple explanation as to why suffering happens. Oh, there are some answers. We have some idea of why people suffer. I've already said that sin causes a lot of suffering. From drunk driving, to child abuse, to crime, to terrorism, to war—sin causes a lot of pain—perhaps most pain. The laws of nature also causes some suffering. For example, the same law of gravity which makes life possible also results in suffering. Gravity keeps us from floating helpless in the sky, but it also causes people to fall down and break their hip or leg. We have to have gravity to exist, but it also causes suffering. So, sin causes some suffering, and the laws of nature causes some suffering.

Profound evil—what we can call Satan—also causes some suffering. And some suffering comes from plain old bad luck—being in the wrong place at the wrong time. So there are some explanations we can offer as to why good people suffer.

But in the end, we don't fully know why. We see through a glass darkly says Paul. We will never know all the answers. And even if we did, would that really make any difference? If Job could have found a rational explanation for his suffering, he would still have ten empty chairs around the breakfast table. His bank account would still be empty. And he would still be sick. Job didn't need a rational answer as to why he was suffering. That would not help Job in the least. You see, Job's why questions—why did my children die? Why did my business collapse? Why am I sick?—while understandable, are ultimately not helpful. In the end, rational explanations would not help Job cope with his pain. Therefore, I'd like to very briefly suggest two other questions, more helpful questions. And don't worry, we'll be done in just a minute!

**2. *What Can I Do Now?*** First, I'd like to suggest that instead of asking why questions, we would do better to ask *what* questions. See no. 2 on your listening guide: What can I do now? Since this has happened to me, what do I do about it? What can I do to cope? What resources can I turn to for help? What can I learn from this struggle? Let me give you an example.

Years ago, John Claypool's eleven-year-old daughter was diagnosed with leukemia. I told you a bit about this in an earlier sermon. John's first response was to ask why. Why God, is there such a thing as leukemia? Why did my girl have to get it? But after a while, John realized that these kind of why questions, while understandable, were ultimately futile. The fact is, he would never know why. And even if he did, it would not help much. Therefore, he began to ask what questions. What treatments are available? What do I tell my daughter? What can I do to give her support? What can I do to help my wife through this? When John moved from why questions to what questions, he was much better able to cope with the crisis. The same is true with Job. In the end, he quit asking why because he knew he would never fully know why, and even if he did, it wouldn't help much. So instead of asking why questions, he began to ask what questions—like what can I do to cope with this? And when he moved from asking why to asking what, he took a major step toward wholeness, healing, and recovery.

**3. Who Can Help Me?** And one last thing. Job also asked one final question. See no 3 on your guide. The **who** question: Who can help me through this crisis? And Job discovered, like millions of others, that God can help. Job learned that God does not give us answers, for intellectual answers would not be enough. Instead, God gives Himself. God gives his companionship. God gives his courage. God gives his strength. God gives his hope. And that my friends—that is worth one thousand answers—and ten thousand reasons.

### LISTENING GUIDE: “Job’s Question”

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Am I Suffering?
  - A. Job’s Friends Answer: It’s \_\_\_\_\_ Fault.  
*“Is not your wickedness great? Are not your sins endless? ... That is why snares are all around you, why sudden peril terrifies you, why it is so dark you cannot see, and why a flood of water covers you.” (22: 5, 10)*
  - B. Job’s Answer: It’s \_\_\_\_\_ Fault.  
*The arrows of the Almighty are in me, my spirit drinks in their poison; God’s terrors are marshaled against me.” (6: 4) “God assails me and tears me in his anger and grades his teeth at me.” (16:9)*
  - C. Job’s Editor’s Answer: It’s \_\_\_\_\_ Fault.  
*“Satan went out from the presence of the Lord and afflicted Job with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the top of his head.” (2: 7).*
  - D. God’s Answer: \_\_\_\_\_  
*“I will question you, and you shall answer me. Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation? Tell me if you understand ...” (38: 4)*
2. \_\_\_\_\_ Can I Do Now?
3. \_\_\_\_\_ Can Help Me?

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**When Life Is Unfair**  
**Part 4 - Job's Pain**  
*Job 19: 25-26*

I want to read you a letter, sent to an insurance company, concerning a workers compensation claim. "Dear Sir, I am writing in response to your request for additional information. I trust that the following details will be sufficient. I am a bricklayer by trade. On the day of the accident, I was working alone on the roof of a six story building. When I completed my work, I discovered that I had 500 pounds of brick left over. Rather than carry the bricks down by hand, I decided to lower them in a barrel by using a pulley. Securing the rope at ground level, I went up to the roof, and loaded the bricks into the barrel. Then I went back to the ground and untied the rope, holding it tightly to insure a slow descent of the 500 pounds of bricks.

You will note in block number eleven of the accident report form that I weigh 135 pounds. Due to my surprise of being jerked off the ground so suddenly, I lost my presence of mind and forgot to let go of the rope. Needless to say, I proceeded at a rather rapid rate up the side of the building. In the vicinity of the third floor, I met the barrel coming down. This explains the fractured skull and broken collarbone. Slowed only slightly, I continued my rapid ascent, not stopping until the fingers of my right hand were two-knuckles deep into the pulley. Fortunately, by this time I had regained my presence of mind and was able to hold tightly to the rope in spite of my pain.

At approximately the same time, however, the barrel of bricks hit the ground, and the bottom fell out of the barrel. Devoid of the weight of the bricks, the barrel now weighed approximately fifty pounds. I refer you again to my weight in block number eleven. As you might imagine, I began a rapid descent down the side of the building. In the vicinity of the third floor, I met the barrel coming up. This accounts for the two fractured ankles and the lacerations to my legs and lower body. The encounter with the barrel slowed me enough to lessen my injuries when I fell onto the pile of bricks and, fortunately, only three vertebrae were cracked. I am sorry to report, however, that as I lay there on the bricks, in pain, unable to stand, and watching the barrel six stories above me, I again lost my presence of mind, I let go of the rope."

Well, this poor guy experienced a lot of pain! And so did a fellow in the Bible by the name of Job. We've currently in a series on Job, and today we come to the topic, Job's Pain. Please turn to your listening guide. (**Listening guide can be found at the end of this sermon**). That Job suffered pain is obvious throughout the book. This text from chapter 6 is indicative of his pain. [read 6:2-3] In fact, Job suffered multiple kinds of pain, as you can see in your listening guide. First, Job suffered **physical** pain [see text]. Second, Job suffered **emotional** pain [see text]. Third, Job suffered **relational** pain [see text]. Fourth, Job suffered **spiritual** pain [see text]. Clearly, Job experienced tremendous pain. Of course, that's certainly not unique to Job. All people experience pain.

Many of you here today have read the bestselling book, or seen the movie, "*The Fault in Our Stars*." I saw the movie a couple of months ago, and it's a serious tear jerker. The book and the movie tell the story of two teenagers who have cancer, and who fall in love. Although sad, it's mostly a life-affirming story. One of the key lines in the book is, "Pain demands to be felt." That line could easily be the subtitle of the book of Job: "Pain demands to be felt." Job certainly felt pain. However, the fact that Job experienced pain is not all that interesting to me.

The fact is, everybody experiences pain, including you and me. It's part of being human. What interests me about Job's pain, and the real point of today's sermon—is that in his pain, Job discovered God. (Pause and repeat). In his pain—Job discovered God. We see that clearly in today's primary text. (Read from listening guide: Job 19:26) Job's great insight is that when we are in pain—God is there, if we have the eyes to see him. Of course, Job is certainly not the only person who has figured that out. The famous author C. S. Lewis learned that. When his wife died and he was in awful grief, Lewis learned that God can be found in pain. (Read his quote in listening guide). Martin Luther, the great reformer of the 16th century learned the same thing. Luther experienced a lot of pain in his lifetime, including a serious struggle with depression. But Luther learned that God can be found in pain. (Read his quote in listening guide). The Roman soldier who executed Jesus learned that truth. In fact, it was in Jesus' suffering and death that the soldier recognized Jesus' identity. (Read text from listening guide).

You see, it's important for us to remember that at the very heart of the gospel is a cross. And the cross tells us that God is a crucified God. And the promise of the gospel is that the God of the cross will enter our pain and meet us there. God may not take our pain away, but God will



be present with us in our pain, and he will help redeem that pain. Therefore, like Job, we can say, “even though my skin is destroyed, I will see God.”

I came across a story once about an Episcopalian Bishop named James Folts. When Bishop Folts robes up for worship, he always wears a big golden cross around his neck. The cross is 6 inches tall, 4 inches wide, and about  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches thick. That’s a big cross! Well, there’s a story behind that cross. Before he became a bishop, Rev. Folts pastored a church in San Antonio for many years, and was beloved by the congregation. When he was elected Bishop, and had to leave his church, the congregation wanted to give him a gift. After much discussion, they decided to give him a large gold cross that he could wear with his pulpit robe. However, they didn’t want to purchase a cross for him, they wanted to **make** him a cross, one that was a part of their congregation. So they sent out the word across the congregation that they were collecting gold to make a cross for their beloved pastor. Gold started pouring in, and it was sent to a jeweler. The jeweler melted it down, and fashioned it into the large cross that the Bishop now wears. The most interesting part of that story is what is included in that cross.

For example, some people gave old high school and college rings for the cross. But other members of the congregation gave more personal items, items that represented a lot of pain in their life. For example, dozens of wedding rings came in from widows and widowers. Those rings represented joy and gratitude, but also real grief. Numerous divorcees also gave rings, representing the pain of failed marriages. Inside the Bishop’s cross is a wedding ring that a young man bought for the love of his life. But just one week before the wedding she decided she didn’t want to get married. He was heartbroken, and he dealt with the sorrow by giving the unused ring for the pastor’s cross. Inside that cross is a college ring that had belonged to a young man in the congregation. The ring was given by the young man’s parents. Their son was killed a few years after his graduation. They had saved his college ring for years, and decided they wanted to give his ring for the Bishop’s cross. Inside that cross are some gold beads from a broken necklace given by a mother in the congregation. Her son, when he was four years old, had gotten into her jewelry box and broke the necklace, spilling the gold beads all over the floor. She put the loose beads back into the jewelry box, but never got around to fixing the necklace. A year later her little boy died in a car wreck. On the day that would have been his 9th birthday, she gave those beads to be a part of the Bishop’s cross.



On and on it went. People from throughout the congregation gave pieces of gold—many of which symbolized a lot of pain in their life. They gave the gold items as an act of love for their pastor. They gave the items as an act of faith in a God of the cross who understood and entered their pain. And, they gave the items as an act of hope that the crucified God could redeem and heal their pain and even make something useful and beautiful out of it. Finally, after all the gold came in, the jeweler melted the items—and all the pain they represented—and that pain was forged into a beautiful gold cross.

I don't fully know all the pain you carry with you today. But I do have some advice for you—some gospel advice. I advise that you take your pain, and that you place it into the nail scarred hands of Jesus Christ. And if you do so, you will discover that the God of the cross, the crucified God, will enter your pain with you. Like Job of old you will be able to say, even in your pain, "I know that my redeemer lives, and even though my skin is destroyed, I will see God."

### **Listening Guide: "Job's Pain"**

"If only my anguish could be weighed and all of my misery be placed on the scales! It would surely outweigh the sand of the seas." (6:2-3)

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Pain

"My body is clothed with worms and scabs, my skin is broken and festering." (7:5)

2. \_\_\_\_\_ Pain

"I have no peace, no quietness, I have no rest, but only turmoil." (3:26)

3. \_\_\_\_\_ Pain

"All my intimate friends detest me; those I love have turned against me." (19:19)

4. \_\_\_\_\_ Pain

"O God ... why do you hide your face and consider me your enemy?" (13:24)

“Pain demands to be felt.” (*The Fault In Our Stars*)

“After my skin has been destroyed ... I will see God.” (Job 19:26)

“Pain is the megaphone of God. God whispers to us in our pleasures. God speaks to us in our conscience. But God shouts to us in our pain. Pain is God’s megaphone for a deaf world.”  
(C. S. Lewis)

“Without pain man can neither know scripture and faith, nor can he fear and love God. If he has never suffered, he cannot understand what hope is.”(Martin Luther)

“With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last ... and when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and saw how he died, he said, ‘Surely this man was the Son of God.’”  
(Mark 15: 37, 39)

###

**When Life Is Unfair**  
**Part 5 - Job's Friends**  
*Job 3:11-4:1*

My best friend is a man named Jim. He now lives out of state. Jim and I have no secrets from each other. We can talk about anything. We even know each other's finances. Of course, there's not much to know! Through the years, Jim and I have tried to support each other whatever comes. I've never been at a loss for words around Jim—with one exception. A few years ago I received an email from him with troubling news. Jim and his wife had just discovered that their teenage son was using drugs, and they were struggling with what they should do. They were thinking about pulling him out of school and putting him in a drug rehab program, but were not sure it was the right thing. Upon receiving the email I immediately reached for the phone and began to dial Jim's number. But at that very moment I hesitated, and temporarily set the phone back down. I thought to myself, "What in the world will I say to him?"

Most of us have had similar experiences. A family member, friend, co-worker or neighbor has a crisis. Maybe a death in the family, or a divorce, or an accident, or a bad diagnosis, or a lost job. We want to respond with concern and compassion, but we wonder, "What should I say? What should I do? How can I be supportive?" Which brings us to Job's friends. When they heard about Job's troubles they went to see him. When they arrived they made some mistakes, but they also did some good things. So, as we continue our journey through the book of Job, let's look at Job's friends and see how they responded to Job's crisis. They teach us what to do, and what not to do, as we try to support people who are suffering.

***What Job's Friends Did Wrong.*** First, let's look at their mistakes. That they made some mistakes is very clear. Indeed, at one point Job called his three friends, "miserable counselors." What did they do to receive such an indictment from Job? If we look carefully, we can see that they made two primary mistakes. Please turn to your listening guide so you can follow along. ***(Listening guide can be found at the end of this sermon).***

1. *They Offered Answers:* (Read text from listening guide). The first thing Job's friends did wrong is that they offered answers. They tried to explain to Job why he was suffering. They said he was suffering because of sin in his life. As we noted in a

previous sermon, that explanation was inadequate. But even if their answers were right, it wouldn't matter. Job didn't need rational explanations, he needed sympathy. He didn't need theological explanations, he needed compassion. Several years ago a survey was taken from people who had recently experienced the death of a loved one. Virtually all of them said that explanations and answers as to why their loved one died were not helpful and were often hurtful. The three answers which were particularly disliked were: "They are better off now," "It was God's will," and "God needed them more than we did." These kinds of answers and explanations don't comfort people who are in pain, and they often hurt them, so we should refrain from saying such things. Well, their first mistake was—they offered answers. Let's look at their second mistake.

2. *They Discouraged Emotions.* (Read text from listening guide). Job's friends said, in essence, "Job, you shouldn't feel that way. You shouldn't get angry, especially at God. Job, be strong, don't complain, don't cry." A minister tells about a funeral service he once conducted. An elderly woman was crying at the top of her voice moments before the service began. She was crying because it was her own son who had died. She said, "Why? Why did this have to happen? He was so good!" And a 43-year-old man with a three-piece-suit said, "Can't anybody make her shut up? Can't somebody give her a sedative?" "The fact is," said the minister, "that the old woman was the only one in the room who was in her right mind. It was appropriate to grieve over her great loss." When people experience a crisis, they are full of questions and struggle and anger and deep feelings. They need permission to fully express their emotions, even emotions we are uncomfortable with, such as rage. They need to cry and scream and verbalize their pain, anger and loss, and good friends will give them the freedom to do so. Well, Job's friends certainly made some mistakes. They tried to give answers as to why he was suffering, and they discouraged Job from fully expressing his anger, grief and loss.

***What Job's Friends Did Right.*** However, Job's friends were certainly not all bad. They did some good things as well. Let me mention two.

1. *They Went.* (Read text from listening guide). The fact that they went to see Job is no small thing. I'm sure they were tempted to stay away. It's not pleasant to see a friend suffer and most of us would rather avoid the experience. But Job's friends did not avoid seeing him. They mustered the courage to face him and to directly confront his suffering. When our friends suffer, the best thing we can do is to simply show up. We don't have to speak any particular words—just being there is enough. When our friends are hurting, we need to be there for them. Job's friends certainly made some mistakes. But when Job was down, they were there for him, they shared his pain with

him, and that made a world of difference. So, the first good thing Job's friends did is that they went. The second good thing Job's friends did was:

2. *They Listened.* (Read text from listening guide). As you read the book of Job you see that over and over again, Job's friends listened to Job as he poured out his heart. Even when they didn't like what he said, they listened. A famous theologian named Paul Tillich once remarked that the first duty of love is to listen. I believe Tillich is right. When people are suffering they don't need to be talked to, they need to be heard. They need to express their loss, for in doing so they begin the process of healing. So when your friend is hurting you can help by showing up, and then listening to them. Those two gifts are among the most important things you can do to help.

I've been a minister now for over 30 years. And during those years I've been around a lot of human suffering. One thing I've learned is that supportive friends make a huge difference in the lives of people who are going through crisis. As one author has said, "If you want to survive a tragedy, you need a friend." By the way, if you are looking for supportive friends, I encourage you to connect with a small group in this church. We have dozens of them. Well, that author was right. "If you want to survive a tragedy, you need a friend."

That was true for a woman named Janice. When she was told that she had cancer and would have to have a radical mastectomy she was devastated. She said, "It was impossible to comprehend what was about to happen. I cried hysterically. I could not imagine what it would be like. It was so inconceivable that I was actually living this nightmare." A week before her surgery, she just about decided to cancel the surgery, give up, and die. What kept her from doing so? One thing. That night she thumbed through the day's mail. She noticed a postcard from a close friend. Her friend had written one word on the postcard, scrawled in big letters. The one word was: "LIVE!"

Janice pasted that postcard on her bathroom mirror and left it there for over a year—through her surgery, the chemo, the radiation, and the other treatments. She later said, "Whenever I was tempted to give up I would look at that word and repeat it again and again and again: Live! Live! Live!" And you know what? She did.

### **What Job's Friends Did Wrong**

1. *They Offered* \_\_\_\_\_

“Think now, Who, being innocent, has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed? As I have observed, those who plow evil and those who sow trouble reap it. At the breath of God they are destroyed; at the blast of his anger they perish.” (4: 7-9)

2. *They Discouraged* \_\_\_\_\_

“Why has your heart carried you away, and why do your eyes flash, so that you vent your rage against God and pour out such words from your mouth?” (15: 12-13)

### **What Job's Friends Did Right**

1. *They* \_\_\_\_\_

“When Job's three friends heard about all the troubles that had come upon him, they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and comfort him.” (2:11)

2. *They* \_\_\_\_\_

“Then 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. After this, Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. He said: ...” (2: 13 - 3: 2)

###

**When Life Is Unfair**  
**Part 6 - Job's Flaw (Free bonus sermon)**  
*Job 29:7-20*

I recently heard about an air passenger whose flight had been canceled. His patience was gone, so he shoved his way to the head of the ticket line and angrily demanded a first class ticket on the next available flight. The ticket agent explained that he would be happy to help, but he'd just have to wait in line like everybody else. That was more than the man could stand. He said, "Young man, do you have any idea who I am?" At that point the ticket agent picked up his microphone and said, "Attention please. There's a gentleman at the ticket counter who doesn't know who he is. If anyone can identify him, please come to the counter."

Like that man, most of us, from time to time, get puffed up with pride. Sometimes we tend to think too highly of ourselves, or we try to be bigger than we are. Rich and famous people are especially susceptible to feelings of pride. Years ago I heard a story I've never forgotten. The story was about the legendary football coach Paul Bryant, better known as "Bear" Bryant. He was admired and almost worshipped by many. In fact, Bear Bryant was often referred to as the "god of football." Well, one night after a hard game, Paul Bryant came home and got into bed with his wife. Mrs. Bryant said, "God, you are cold!" He said, "You can call me Paul tonight."

Well, it's easy to laugh about pride and make fun of arrogant people. But pride is a serious spiritual disease. In his book, *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis says this about pride: "The essential vice, the utmost evil, is pride. Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that, are mere flea bites in comparison ... Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind."

Why is pride so evil? Because it destroys relationships—with other people and with God. Arrogant, puffed up, self-righteous and self-important people cannot have close relationships with other people. Nobody wants to be around them. Pride also hurts our relationships with God. We get to thinking we are self-sufficient, that we don't need God, and it poisons our spiritual life. The Bible is clear—pride is a serious spiritual problem. And that brings us back to Job. Job was a good man in many ways, but he had one major flaw. Job had a serious pride

problem. In fact, Job was eaten up with pride. We see Job's pride and arrogance all the way through the book. A few examples are printed in your order of worship. (Read first text from the listening guide found below). Translation—I am perfect! (Read second text from listening guide). I can almost hear Carly Simon singing in the background, “*You’re So Vain!*” I mean, this guy is arrogant. Let’s look at the final example. (Read third text from listening guide).

For all his good traits, Job had a major flaw—he was righteous in his own eyes—he was full of pride. And that’s a problem. Why? Because the Bible teaches us that pride is a major flaw, a serious spiritual disease. So a good question to ask is, “What is the cure for pride?” How does a person move from pride to humility? The answer is simple. People lose their pride by bumping into someone, or something, bigger than themselves.

Let me give a personal example. (Although you cannot directly use this story as though it was your own experience, it illustrates using a personal example to make the point). Years ago, I went to a pastor’s conference in Pittsburgh. Several hundred UMC pastors had gathered for a week of continuing education. The conference began with an opening meal for all the participants. I sat by a pastor from North Carolina, and he was really arrogant. He kept talking about how great he did in school, and how good a football player he was, and how wonderful his children’s accomplishments were, and on and on it went.

After a while, we got to talking about our churches. He asked me how large my church was. Now you need to know, UMC churches are mostly small. The average church runs about 75 in worship. At the time I pastored a church than ran a little over 600, which is huge for the UMC. So I thought to myself, this is my chance to put this guy in his place. I said, with no small amount of pride, “Oh, we run a little over 600 in worship.” Feeling smug I asked him, “How many do you run?” He said, “Oh, we run about 2,000.” A little later the conversation turned to writing. He knew I had done some writing and had even read one of my books. He asked me, “How many books have you written?” At that time I had written four books. So I said, with great pride, “I’ve published four books.” He said, “I’ve done some writing myself.” “Really,” I said, figuring he had written maybe a measly article or two. “Yea,” he said, “I’m currently working on my *seventh* book.” Believe me, that conversation knocked the wind right out of my sails. I bumped into someone bigger than myself and it put me back in my place.

That’s what happened with Job, except on a much bigger level. He kept talking about how righteous he was, and how unfair his suffering was, and how God owed him an explanation,



and even an apology. Finally, after almost endless expressions of pride and arrogance, God speaks to Job. And when God does, God puts Job in his place. God's response to Job's pride is one of the most remarkable passages in all of scripture. Let's look at just a few highlights. (Read text from listening guide). And this goes on for four full chapters! In machine gun fashion, God asks these kinds of questions to Job, over and over again. Finally, God stops asking his questions. And Job, overwhelmed by God's glory, falls down on the ground before God and repents in dust and ashes. (Read text from guide). You see, when Job was confronted with the awesome power and majesty and greatness of God, Job realized how small and puny and weak he was, and his pride and arrogance dissipated into thin air.

Job reminds me of a man named Captain Russell Smith, a navy officer in England. He commanded the Queen of England's personal yacht. On one particular night, Captain Smith was invited to have dinner with the Queen. The dining room and meal was exquisite, and Captain Smith was so proud to be the captain of this ship. After dinner the captain said to the Queen, "Your Majesty, if you would please excuse me I must return to the bridge to make sure things are in good order." "Of course, Captain, said the queen, "it's been wonderful dining with you." As the captain left the dining room, his heart was full of pride. Proud of who he was. Proud of the ship he commanded. And proud of the respect he earned from the Queen herself.

When Captain Smith returned to the bridge, however, he noticed a light in the path ahead. The light was bright enough to suggest that this was a sizable cruise ship. The Captain ordered his signal master to send a message saying, "Alter your course." The Captain stood, waiting for a response. The approaching light flashed the answer, "You alter *your* course." Well, Captain Smith was indignant. He ordered his signal master to send the following message. "My name is Captain Russell Smith. This is Her Royal Majesty's private yacht. The Queen is aboard. This is a Royal Command. *You will alter your course.*" They waited. For what seemed like minutes there was no answer. Then the approaching light responded. This was his message. "My name is Tom Johnson. I've been in charge of this lighthouse for sixteen years. You will alter **YOUR** course."

When Job finally bumped up against something bigger than he was, he altered his course. In the presence of Almighty God, Job realized how small and puny he was. He let go of his self-righteous arrogant pride, and he humbled himself before the God of the universe. We would do well to follow his example.

## Listening Guide: “Job’s Flaw”

### ***Job’s Arrogance***

“I will maintain my righteousness and never let go of it; my conscience will not reproach me as long as I live.” (27:6)

“When I went to the gate of the city and took my seat in the public square, the young men saw me and stepped aside and the old men rose to their feet... the voices of the nobles were hushed... whoever heard me, spoke well of me, and those who saw me commended me... my glory will remain fresh in me.” (29:7-11, 20)

“Job was righteous in his own eyes.” (32:1)

### ***God’s Questions***

“Then the Lord answered Job... Were you there when I laid the earth’s foundation? Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Have you ever given orders to the morning, or shown the dawn its place? Have you journeyed to the depths of the sea? Have you comprehended the vast expanses of the earth? Tell me, if you know all this. Can you bring forth the constellations in their seasons? Do you know the laws of the heavens? Can you set up God’s dominion over the earth? Do you send the lightning bolts on their way? Do you give the horse his strength or clothe his neck with a flowing mane? Does the hawk take flight by your wisdom, does the eagle soar at your command? Do you have an arm like God’s, and can your voice thunder like his ...?” (selected verses, chapter 38-41)

### ***Job’s Response***

“I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth ... Surely I spoke of things I did not understand ... Therefore I repent in dust and ashes.” (40:4, 42:3,6)

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**When Life Is Unfair**  
**Part 7 - Job's Recovery**  
*Job 42:10-17*

I once heard a story about two couples. One couple had a teenage son, the other a teenage daughter. Their two children were high school sweethearts. On the night of their senior prom, these two teenagers were involved in a terrible automobile accident and both were killed. Both sets of parents went through a terrible year of grief. However, about a year later, they had to decide what to do next. The two couples chose very different paths. The couple whose son died chose to live their life in the past. They held on to their grief and pain and despair. To this day, their son's room is just like it was on the night he was killed, a sort of eternal shrine to their grief and loss and pain. Although they go through the motions of living, they are dead inside—there is no joy or love or laughter in their home.

The couple whose daughter died chose a different path. Although they loved their daughter more than life itself, and their grief over her death was enormous, they decided to live again. Although they no longer have a teenage girl, they are active leaders of their churches youth group, they keep exchange students, and they live life with joy and fullness. It's not that they have forgotten their grief. They still have occasional tears and deep feelings of loss. Nobody fully recovers from that kind of loss. But rather than spent their life living in past grief, they have chosen to move forward with hope and life. They have chosen to believe that God is a God of the resurrection, a God of new hope and new life, a God of new beginnings. Two couples, two tragedies, and two very different responses.

And that brings us back to Job one final time. As you know by now, Job faced huge losses in his life. Job lost his finances, his health, and his children. And as we would expect, Job responded with grief. He went through all the common stages: shock, numbness, anger, despair, and depression. But finally, after walking through a long journey of grief, Job had to make a decision. Would he live the rest of his life holding on to past grief and live in despair and bitterness? Or would he choose to let go of his grief and move forward with hope and live again?

Thankfully, in the end that's what Job did. His losses were severe, as was his grief. But there finally came a time when Job chose to let loose of his grief, and move forward, and live again. For example, we learn in the text that Job reconciled with his friends. He reconnected with his relatives. He began a new family. And he renewed his business. Obviously, this was a long term and complex process. No doubt he always carried scars from his experience. But in the end, Job made the decision to hope again, and laugh again, and love again, and live again.

Each one of us has, or will, face a similar decision. We all get wounded in life, face losses, and experience pain. And when we do, we grieve, and that is normal and appropriate. But finally, there comes a decision. Will we continue to live in past grief, nursing our pain and loss until we finally become bitter and lifeless? Or, will we eventually let go of that grief, and hope and risk and live again like Job did?

Earlier in this series, I told you about a man named John Claypool. John experienced at least three great losses in his life. He lost his church. His old denomination shifted in a way he could not support, so he resigned his pastorate, and for a while, lost his vocation. Far more painful, he lost his daughter to leukemia. And sadly, as is often the case after the death of a child, he lost his marriage. In response, John spent a long time dealing with overwhelming grief. He was tempted to just give up on life, withdraw from living, and become a bitter person. However, what I admire about John is that he did not choose to do that. Instead, he chose to live again. He believed that God was a God of the cross and therefore understood and entered his pain. But he also believed that God was a God of resurrection, a God of new life and new hope and new beginnings. We sang about that a few minutes ago when we sang "*Hymn of Promise.*" In time, John, like Job, made the decision to love, laugh, and live again, in spite of his very real losses.

Several years ago, I heard John tell a story that meant a lot to me. I was going through a lot of grief of my own, both personally and professionally, and the story spoke deeply to me. The story is about John's grandfather and his cherished plum tree. This beautiful plum tree stood for decades in his grandfather's yard. It was the prize of the farm and the pride of his granddaddy's eye. Then one day a horrible storm swept through the community. In its power, the storm twisted the plum tree from its roots and left it lying lifeless on its side. After the storm was over, people ventured out to survey the damage. Before long a few neighborhood men gathered in the grandfather's yard. They all stood silent in a circle, gazing down at

the once beautiful plum tree now ruined beyond repair. Finally, one of the men asked the grandfather, “What are you going to do with that tree?” After a long pause the old man replied, “I’m going to pick the fruit and burn the rest.” (Pause and repeat) “I’m going to pick the fruit and burn the rest.”

John, who faced enormous grief in his own life, went on to say that picking the fruit and burning the rest is the best response we can make to life’s wounds, storms, losses and pains. First, we must pick the fruit. Even from awful experiences we can pick new sensitivities, insights, discoveries and growth. But eventually we must burn the rest—the anger, the grief, and the bitterness. We must finally let it go or it will destroy us.

I wonder today, what grief are you carrying? What past hurt, failure or disappointment do you hold in your heart? And I further wonder, is it is time to let it go? Is it time to pick the fruit and burn the rest? It may not be time yet. Grief takes time and you may not be finished with your grief work. But some of you may be. Like Job, you may be ready to let the past grief go, and to move forward with life.

For example, not long ago I talked to a person who went through an extremely contentious divorce. This person grieved over it as they should. But the grief turned into bitterness toward their ex-spouse that deeply poisoned their soul. Finally, that person decided, it’s time to let my anger and bitterness toward my ex-spouse go, before it totally destroys me. In short, it was time for them to pick the fruit and burn the rest. There was plenty of fruit to pick from their marriage, including a wonderful child. But it was also time to burn the rest—the hate and bitterness and unforgiving spirit. It was not easy, but this person let go of their bitterness. Several years later, they are alive again, remarried, and full of hope and love.

On each side of the sanctuary today is a basket full of holly bush leaves. Each leaf has several thorns on it. (Hold one up. Note: you could also give out some kind of thorn at the beginning of the service instead of the end. However, we were concerned about children pricking themselves, so we did it this way instead). Today, if you want to participate, let these thorns represent some pain in your life—some grief or wound or loss or failure or disappointment. Think about it for a moment. What could these thorns represent in your life? Take a moment and name it. In just a moment, a soloist is going to sing a song called “This is a Day of New Beginnings.” One of the stanzas says, “Then let us, with the Spirit’s daring, step from the past

and leave behind, our disappointments, guilt and grieving, seeking new paths, and sure to find.” During that song we invite those of you who want to participate to walk down the side of the sanctuary, and pick up one of these leaves with the thorns. Then, we invite you to bring that leaf right here at the front of the altar, and leave it in this basket. (Pick up a leaf from the side of the sanctuary and then walk to the baskets at the chancel area and place the leaf in the basket so they know exactly what you are talking about). By doing so you will be saying, “God, with your help, I want to let go of this past grief and pain, and move forward with my life.” I want to pick the fruit and burn the rest.

However, there is no expectation or pressure for you to do this. You may not need to do this at this time in your life because you don’t have anything to burn. Or, you might not be emotionally ready to do this yet. If so that’s OK. But if you are ready, then you are invited to let this spiritual ritual with the thorned leaves symbolize letting go of the past, and reaching forward with hope to the future.

(Pause, from the altar area, and say) Finally, after a long silence, one of the men asked the grandfather, “What are you going to do with that tree?” After a long pause the old man replied, “I’m going to pick the fruit and burn the rest.” May it be so in your life, and in mine. And now, as the song begins, you are welcome to come forward as the Spirit leads you.

