



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

Jumping to Conclusions

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Introduction to Scripture

This morning we will be studying together from the Book of Job in the Old Testament. This unusual book of the Bible is a difficult one to study because it's really a long drama; it would be better acted out on a stage than just read—comparable to the way Shakespeare's plays are far more entertaining when they are acted out on stage or screen than when they are contained in a book.

Job is also difficult to read because it's so emotionally devastating. The hero of the story is a great man—in every respect. He was a hugely successful businessman—a multi-millionaire by today's standards. He was an extremely devout and faithful, morally upright and compassionate man. He had a beautiful family. And at breathtaking speed, one by one, all his blessings were taken away from Job. He was a tragic figure, as heartbreaking as any in world literature, from ancient Greek tragedies to Shakespeare's Hamlet and King Lear.

But the really tricky part to understanding this drama of Job is that something was going on in the spiritual dimension—"offstage," so to speak, in heaven—that overshadowed the tragic events occurring on earth. And Job and the other characters in the drama were completely unaware of what was really happening. Today we pick up the story as the depths of the personal tragedy are unfolding, for Job has just learned of the devastating loss of his family and fortune.

When Job heard this, he tore his clothes and shaved his head because of his great sorrow. He knelt on the ground, then worshiped God ²¹and said:

“We bring nothing at birth;
we take nothing
with us at death.
The LORD alone gives and takes.
Praise the name of the LORD!”

²²In spite of everything, Job did not sin or accuse God of doing wrong.

2 When the angels gathered around the LORD again, Satan was there with them, ²and the LORD asked, “Satan, where have you been?”

Satan replied, “I have been going all over the earth.”

³Then the LORD asked, “What do you think of my servant Job? No one on earth is like him—he is a truly good person, who respects me and refuses to do evil. And he hasn’t changed, even though you persuaded me to destroy him for no reason.”

⁴Satan answered, “There’s no pain like your own. People will do anything to stay alive. ⁵Try striking Job’s own body with pain, and he will curse you to your face.”

⁶“All right!” the LORD replied. “Make Job suffer as much as you want, but just don’t kill him.” ⁷Satan left and caused painful sores to break out all over Job’s body—from head to toe.

⁸Then Job sat on the ash-heap to show his sorrow. And while he was scraping his sores with a broken piece of pottery, ⁹his wife asked, “Why do you still trust God? Why don’t you curse him and die?”

¹⁰Job replied, “Don’t talk like a fool! If we accept blessings from God, we must accept trouble as well.” In all that happened, Job never once said anything against God.

Job 1:20 – 2:10 (CEV)

The Wrong Conclusion

A year after World War I ended in Europe, General John “Black Jack” Pershing, the victorious commander of U.S. forces in France, went on an inspection tour of Army bases back in the States. He arrived at Fort

Riley, Kansas one afternoon for an overnight stop, and was greeted by an entire infantry division standing at attention, as the band played in honor of the great hero.

Pershing approached a bugle player and asked him if he knew how to play the military “fire alarm” on his bugle. “Yes sir, I do,” the private replied. “Fine,” Pershing said. “Meet me at my quarters at 0500 tomorrow morning.” That evening the word spread all through the camp that Black Jack was going to order an early fire drill. That night, the men on fire detail slept in their gear next to the fire wagon, hoping to impress the general with their prompt and efficient response to the alarm.

The next morning Pershing met the bugler and ordered him, “Play Reveille” (the normal morning wakeup call). The soldier gulped and began to play. At the first notes, the fire wagon came roaring out of its station with its crew ready, and Pershing burst out in laughter. The embarrassed men suddenly realized that they had jumped to the wrong conclusion. The general never said he was going to order a fire drill.

Jumping hastily to the wrong conclusions is something we’ve all done, even the brightest of us. Sometimes, like those firefighter soldiers, the result is just embarrassment. And sometimes the consequences are more serious. Learned scientists have made mistaken conclusions. A number of years ago a couple chemists at the University of Utah thought they had discovered something profound when they ran an electric current through a beaker of “heavy water.” They concluded from this one experiment that they had discovered a ground-breaking new process they labeled “cold fusion.” This would have the potential to safely solve all the energy needs of the world without the danger of nuclear fission. Hoping to cash in on the lucrative royalties and patents, they held a press conference to announce their breathtaking discovery. The only problem: every subsequent test by that pair and by scientists around the world failed to replicate the results. Their reputations went in the tank, along with all their hoped-for riches, because they jumped too quickly to the wrong conclusion.

It happens on the personal level, even with our closest relationships. How many misunderstandings between husbands and wives, or

parents and children, could be avoided if we really listened to each other rather than hearing partially and forming our own conclusions? How many times have we been impatient with someone at work, or someone on the golf course or tennis court, imputing the worst motive to them without finding out what happened? How often have we blown up in anger, only to regret later that we hadn't been more patient and waited to get all the facts? How many times have we pre-judged another person on the basis of their appearance before getting to know who they are on the inside? How many pathetic examples have we seen in the media and politics of people jumping to wrong conclusions about a news event? You'll recall how CNN misjudged a high school student from a Catholic school in Kentucky, slandered him publicly, and ended up having to pay a huge settlement in a lawsuit.

Wrong Conclusions about God

As disastrous as these mistakes can be in our relationships with family and friends and in our work, an even more serious consequence comes when we jump to the wrong conclusions about God (or about what He's doing in our world). We sadly see this mistake repeated over and over, by smart people who ought to know better. Here are the three most common ways I've seen people jump to the wrong conclusions about God.

1. God does not love us or can't help us.

From difficult or painful experiences we might conclude that God does not love us or is powerless to help us. The reasoning goes like this: If there is a God, and if He really cares, then surely He would never let something bad happen to me or the ones I love. This is what Job's bitter, angry wife concluded—and she tried to get Job to join her in this condemnation. It's possible that someone in our sanctuary today, or listening to my words somewhere else, has struggled with anger and resentment of God. Such a conclusion can make it much harder to maintain a vital spiritual life.

A number of years ago, when I was living in another city, I got to know a guy who worked out at the same gym I did. He had two beautiful daughters but always wanted a son. His wife got pregnant again when

she was 39, this time with a boy, but it was a difficult pregnancy and she lost the baby. Her OB/GYN recommended a hysterectomy. My friend was bitter, and blamed God. He decided to stop going to church to show God his anger, and encouraged his wife and daughters to stop attending as well.

Who was he punishing by his bitterness? Himself and those he loved, not God. I decided to be direct with him. "J.T., I know it hurts. But you've got to let go of the self-pity and the bitterness. Some of us don't have any children at all, and you're blessed with two precious girls. How can you say that God has been unloving and unkind to you, or has picked on you? Maybe His plan for you is just different than what you thought you wanted." I think it gave him a different perspective, and I hope it helped redirect his toxic feelings. Be careful that you don't jump to the wrong conclusion about God because of a disappointment you've felt at some point in your life.

2. Hardships are automatically bad for us.

A second common mistaken assumption we draw is to think that every trial or struggle or hardship we experience is automatically bad for us. In fact, when we take the time to read Scripture and to look back over our lives we can see that some things which at first glance seemed bad actually worked for our good. I look back on my own parents' divorce when I was a teenager, and the disruption it caused our family to move 2,000 miles across the country, but that experience preceded my meeting some new friends, who invited me to their church youth group, and through that I found a relationship with Christ and started on an entirely new course for my life. There is always pain in this world. It is only in the struggles that we grow and become stronger. If we never experienced the limits of our own strength and resources and were confident we could handle everything ourselves, many of us would never have turned to God.

3. We don't need God in the good times.

The third common wrong conclusion about God: thinking we don't need the Lord when things are going well. The thrills of career success, the joys of good health, the emotional highs of getting married, becoming a parent, getting a new job, moving to a new home: all of

these can function like drugs to dull our senses about our true spiritual dependency. We can so easily forget that all good things come ultimately from Him. He created us, He gave us our families, our minds, our bodies, and our abilities, and has granted to most of us many decades to live on this finely-tuned and beautifully-functioning planet. He sustains our lives, and protects us from dangers seen and unseen, up until that day He has appointed for each of us to leave this earth.

How can we ever conclude that we are completely sufficient unto ourselves? How can we ever believe the lie that we are invincible? And how can we not see that the changes and health issues, the losses and sorrows of life, are all pointing to our need to know God and trust ourselves into His hands?

A Role Model of Trust

Those are the three most common wrong conclusions people make in the spiritual dimension. In spite of his great suffering, we commend this man Job for not falling into those traps. He clung to his trust in God's power and goodness. He believed that God could work good even out of tragedy. And when he was prosperous, he never imagined that he was anything other than blessed by God. Job's faith is indelibly expressed in the final verse of our text: "If we accept blessings from God, we must accept trouble as well."

And we readers know some things about Job's situation that he was unaware of as he was going through his fiery trials. We know that his sufferings were a test of his faith, not a cruel punishment. And we know (because we can read the last chapter of the book) that ultimately God restored his health and his fortune and his family. We know, even beyond what Job could have imagined in the time of the Old Testament, that eventually the Messiah would come and would offer eternal life to all who will believe in Him. We can now see confidently from our perspective how wise Job was to not jump to the wrong conclusions in the midst of his sufferings. If only we can follow his example, when we go through our own hard times!

The Wisdom of the Woodcutter

Christian author Max Lucado, who spent time as a missionary in Brazil, has shared this old Brazilian folk tale called "The Wisdom of the Woodcutter." An old man lived in a small village. Although poor, because his low-paying job was to cut firewood, he was envied by all because he owned a beautiful white horse. A horse such as this had never been seen before, such was its strength and beauty. Even the king coveted his treasure, and many had offered to buy the horse. But the woodcutter always refused: "My horse is not an animal to me, but a friend. How could I sell my friend?" Though poor, he resisted the temptation to gain money by selling the horse.

One morning he found that the horse was not in its stable. Villagers heard the news and came to see him. "You old fool," they scoffed. We told you someone would steal your horse. You should have sold it for a high price." But the woodcutter replied, "Don't speak so quickly. We can say only that the horse is not in the stable. The rest we do not know. All we can see is a fragment. Who can say what will come next?" The people went home muttering about the senile old man who couldn't recognize tragedy when it struck him.

Two weeks later the white horse returned. It hadn't been stolen but had run into the forest. And it returned with 12 wild horses. Once again the village gathered. "You were right, old man. What we thought was a curse was a blessing." The woodcutter replied, "Once again, you speak too soon. Say only that the horse is back with a dozen others. How do we know if this is a blessing or a curse? We see only a fragment." But the people knew he was wrong. Those horses could be broken and sold for a great deal of money.

The old woodcutter's son—his only family—began to train the wild horses. But one day he was thrown from one of the horses and broke both his legs. Again, the village people formed their conclusion. "You were right, old man. The 12 horses were a curse, not a blessing. Now your only son is crippled and will always limp." But, again, the woodcutter replied, "Don't go so far. Say only that my son broke his legs. Who knows if it is a blessing or a curse? We don't know yet. We only see a fragment of life's story."

A few weeks later a war broke out between their country and a

neighbor. The king forced all the young men of the village into the army—all except the woodcutter's son, who had the broken legs. The village mourned. Their sons had been taken, and there was little chance they would return, for the enemy was strong and the war would likely be a losing struggle. They gathered in their grief at the woodcutter's cottage, turning to him as the wise man of their village, and lamented: "You were right. Your son's broken legs were a blessing, not a curse. He is still with you while our sons are gone." And the woodcutter replied, "Again you draw your conclusions too quickly. You cannot know the end. Only God knows, and He will show us in His time. Until then we take what He brings with patience."

The old man was right. Life's mishaps, disappointments and struggles are just a page out of a grand book. We should hold off on forming conclusions until the last chapter.

Ultimate Victory

Where did the old woodcutter receive such wisdom? Perhaps from another woodcutter, a Carpenter from Nazareth who lived 2,000 years ago. That Carpenter, who died on a rugged wooden cross, showed us how wrong it can be to judge a story before the final chapter is written.

It was on a dark Friday afternoon that He was crucified. Surely that, of any human event, was a hopeless black tragedy. At least His enemies thought so with glee. The demons in hell celebrated that night as if they had won a great victory. His disciples, in their despair, drew the conclusion that all was lost, their dreams crushed. Everyone but Jesus jumped to the wrong conclusion. He alone knew He'd be back, triumphantly, on the third day.

We know now that the cross was not the final chapter. When everything looked hopeless, God wasn't done. And so we can know with equal certainty that our final chapters haven't been written either. No matter how dark the present may look, the final word on our lives will be written when we arrive in heaven. And it will be a great, happy ending.

Until then, let's be patient. Let's not come to any premature conclusions about God or His purposes for us. When we undergo trials and challenges, let's

