

Death. Ice. Hypothermia. Windchill. Snow. Shoveling snow. Shoveling more snow. Buying a snow-blower. Salt trucks. Black ice. Dead batteries. Frostbite. Thermal underwear. My wife wearing long thermal pajamas covered with a mountain of blankets for months. Ice fishing. Diminished mental capacity. Seasonal affective disorder. Happy days for the utility companies. Recreational eating. Death. Can anyone say they really like winter?

I know there are people in the world who claim to love winter. But it always makes me wonder: How many people spend their working years in Florida, then retire and move to North Dakota? I have heard people say, “But God made winter—it must be good.” Fact is, there is no mention of winter in the Bible before the Fall. In Genesis we read about trees bursting with fruit and rivers flowing with water and people who didn’t even need clothes. Wherever the Garden of Eden was, it clearly was not Erie, PA in January.

The Bible tells us that winter came because someone once did something very, very bad. People have been paying for it ever since. I speak from experience. I have lived now for over 30 years in the Pittsburgh area, which was settled when folks on the other side of the Alleghenies said, “Isn’t there some place in the commonwealth where it gets even colder?” Regardless of what you may feel about the meteorological season, I want us to think about a kind of winter of the soul, a “spiritual winter.” You may be able to relocate to some part of the world where you can avoid cold weather, but there is no place you can move to escape spiritual winter.

Theologian Martin Marty wrote a book of reflections about the terminal illness and loss of his beloved wife. He said one of the resources human beings need is what he calls “a wintry spirituality” for times when the warmth and joy is taken away from us and a sunny disposition is not enough to bring them back. We need a way of holding on to God when it feels as if God has let go of us. Winter may come when someone has lost a job or experienced vocational failure. They feel a deep sense of sadness, even shame. They are not sure, without this job, who they are anymore. (Adapted from Ortberg, John, *God Is Closer Than You Think* (p. 140). Zondervan)

All of which brings us to the oldest wisdom book of the Bible, titled after its main character—Job. The story begins, “*There once was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job.*” The reader is supposed to try to figure out where Uz was. Yet the directions are deliberately vague: “*This man was the greatest of all the people of the east*” (Job 1:3). The

writer's point is that Job is not a part of any particular people or place. You could put the setting like this: "A long time ago, in a place far, far away..."

The problems in this book are the problems of the human race. All of us have or will wrestle at some time with the absence of God. In the beginning everything is as we think it should be. Job is "*blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.*" He is so cautious he even offers daily sacrifices for his children—just in case, they have sinned. Maybe God is easily offended. God gives him a wonderful life and the amount of blessing he experiences is directly proportional to the amount of obedience he offers.

But winter is coming. Uz will be a place where very bad things happen to a very good man. Uz will be a place, not just where suffering comes, but where it comes without warning and without explanation, creating confusion and despair. Job yearns for a shred of hope, not that God would necessarily end his suffering, but at least, that God was there in the pain. But God was absent.

The suffering of the innocent has always been a major stumbling block to many believers' faith in Christ. It's a troublesome subject and our reading for today raises it in a troublesome way. The book of Job directly challenges the common wisdom of ancient Israel and of modern Christianity about suffering. If you are suffering, it must be because you did something wrong. It's a simple equation; do something wrong and suffer the consequences; and often it is completely wrong, as in the famous case of Job.

This gut-wrenching story skewers that conventional wisdom in an unforgettable way. But along the way to a helpful, hopeful conclusion, Job raises some troubling questions about God and Satan and us. Job 1:22 is perhaps the most important verse in this passage, because like the very first verse of the book, it declares Job's complete innocence. Though he was not sinless (as he himself admits later in his argument with his dear friends), he "*did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing*" (Job 1:22). He "*feared God and turned away from evil.*" verse 1 says. If ever there was a man who didn't deserve to suffer, it was Job. Indeed, he didn't suffer at all prior to the evil intrusion of Satan; he lived a charmed life or, more accurately, a life blessed to overflowing by God. It is his complete innocence that makes his suffering so incomprehensible to him, and to us.

Except that we are let in on a nasty little secret about the reason for his suffering. It all came about because Satan taunted God about the reason for Job's innocence. That conversation immediately precedes our passage, and we get the tail end of the story when we read, "*So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord*" (v. 12b). Satan is constantly at

work to ruin God's good earth. He was "*going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it*" (Job 1:7). The word translated "*to and fro*" can refer to the turbulence of the ocean or the disturbance of the air when a whip is cracked. In other words, Satan is always looking to stir up trouble, to disturb the peace of the planet.

For a moment, imagine the case of a teacher who gets laid off during a school budget cut and thinks, "This is God's punishment because I didn't become a missionary." Taking her layoff as a sign, she enrolls in seminary and borrows money to pay for it. Three years later, she graduates and begins trying to raise support for her mission. If indeed God caused the layoff to punish her for not becoming a missionary, she has ceased the offense. She should be in good shape. Right? But what if her layoff was not a punishment from God? What happens if she fails to raise her support as a missionary? She will have no job and tens of thousands of dollars of debt. Will she then feel abandoned by God if her missionary plan doesn't work out?

The Accuser—Satan—hopes to set just such a trap for Job. Satan says to God that if he removes the blessings he has so richly bestowed on Job, "*He will curse you to your face*" (Job 1:11). If Satan can get Job to believe he is being punished by God, Job may abandon his righteous habits in the mistaken assumption that they are offensive to God. Or he will become bitter at God for his undeserved punishment, and abandon God altogether.

We are not told why, but God allows Satan to proceed. Then one harrowing day, nearly everything Job treasures is stolen and the people he loves—including all his children—are murdered or killed in violent storms (Job 1:13-16). But Job neither assumes God is punishing him nor becomes bitter over God's treatment. Instead, he worships God (Job 1:20). At his lowest moment, Job blesses God's authority over all the circumstances of life, good or bad. "*The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord*" (Job 1:21).

Job's finely balanced attitude is truly remarkable. He rightly understands his previous prosperity as a blessing from God. He does not imagine he ever deserved God's blessing. Because he knows he didn't deserve his former blessings, he knows he does not necessarily deserve his current sufferings. He does not take his condition to be an indicator of God's favor. Consequently, he doesn't pretend to know why God blessed him with prosperity at one time and not at another. I believe that Job's story is a rebuke of the so-called "prosperity gospel," which claims that those in right relationship with God are always blessed with prosperity. Job is "Exhibit A" that this is not true. Yet Job is also a rebuke of the "poverty gospel" which claims that a right relationship with God implies a life of poverty and struggle. The idea that believers should intentionally emulate Job's

losses is just too far-fetched. God might call us to give up everything, if doing so were necessary under the circumstances to serve or follow him. But the book of Job makes no suggestion that God automatically desires any of us to live in poverty. Job's original prosperity was a genuine blessing of God, and his extreme poverty is a genuine calamity.

In the 1950s at McGill University in Canada scientists began experimenting around the question of how a human being might react if he or she were placed in a situation in which all sensory stimulation was ended. That means: no sound, no sight, no patterns, no touch, no voices—nothing. Participants in a study were placed in sterile, dark rooms with nothing soft, absolutely no sound, no color, no texture on the walls. The temperature was carefully regulated and participants had access only to a button to end the experiment.

Researchers quickly found that for the first few minutes of the experiment participants relaxed. Without the constant stimuli of the lives we live, their heart rates slowed and their breathing relaxed. But after only a few minutes, that began to completely and dramatically change. In fact, participants soon started to struggle and struggle grew to panic. Participants' heart rates went up alarmingly, they began to sweat profusely and do what they could to create stimuli—yell, pound on the walls, sing, that sort of thing. No one lasted long.

Not only is the experience of sensory deprivation immediately and horribly anxiety-provoking; the long-term effects are very serious. If we didn't know this already, this study might just be enough to convince us that we need to feel God, and most certainly in those times when life has dealt us a hard blow. An absent, silent or hiding God is unacceptable. We need to feel, we need to know, we need to be reassured that God is there alongside us, even when we don't see visions and dream dreams. Even when, like Job, we look around at the devastation of our lives and wonder where God might be.

God created us in love, in the image of God, our Bible says. And, as a result, there is evidence of God inside each one of us. Therefore, when God seems absent, we can always remember where we have come from. Job remains faithful under adversity because he understands prosperity accurately. He has experienced prosperity as a blessing from God and he is prepared to suffer adversity without jumping to conclusions. He knows what he *doesn't know*, namely why God blesses us with prosperity or allows us to suffer adversity. And he knows what he *does know*, namely that God is faithful, even when God allows us to experience pain and suffering. As a result, "*In all this, (and by "this" the Scripture means the seeming absence of God) Job did not sin by charging God with wrong-doing*" (Job 1:22). Amen.