

The Covenant Pulpit



Ephesians 2:10&11

Job 1&2

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It was the musical extravaganza of the season. The great pianist, Ignace Jan Paderewski, was performing at Carnegie Hall. Among men in tuxedo and women in evening dress was a little boy who had been dragged to the concert by his mother in hopes that he would be inspired to greater diligence in his piano lessons after watching the immortal pianist perform.

As they waited for the concert to begin, his mother turned to talk to friends. Unable to sit still a moment longer, the little boy wiggled out of his seat and headed down the aisle, irresistibly drawn to the ebony concert grand Steinway. He climbed onto the stage and sat down at the piano. Placing trembling fingers on the keys, he began to play "chopsticks." A momentary hush fell over the hall. And then that high-brow audience turned into a snarling mob:

"What's that kid doing up there, anyway?"

"Somebody get that brat away from the piano!"

"Who'd bring a child that young in here?"

"Where's his mother?"

"Hey, kid, get off the stage!"

The *kid*, now paralyzed with fear, continued to play "chopsticks." Backstage, Paderewski heard the uproar. Rushing to the edge of the curtain, the world's greatest pianist was filled with pity for the *kid*. He quickly strode across the stage, reached around both sides of the little boy and began improvise a countermelody to harmonize with and enhance "chopsticks." As the two played together, Paderewski kept whispering in the boy's ear:

"Keep on going. Don't quit now, kid. Keep on playing. Whatever else you do, don't stop now!"

Do you ever feel like that little boy? On the stage of life, it seems that you can barely manage to bang out "chopsticks." And a whole lot of folks are shouting at you, "Hey, kid, get off the stage!" Maybe you're discouraged today. Even the best of saints sometimes want to give up. After 40 years of people shouting at the prophet Jeremiah to get off the stage, his wounded soul screamed out in anguish,

"Why did I ever come forth from the womb to look on trouble and sorrow, so that my days have been spent in shame?" (Jeremiah 20:18)

Imagine a prophet of God wishing that he had been aborted! Elijah begged God to kill him. St. Paul had a mental breakdown. Jesus wanted to die in the

Garden of Gethsemane so that he wouldn't have to face the Cross the next day. Our Lord wanted to jump off the biggest stage of all.

Mrs. Chambers felt that way. Her missionary son, Glen, was on route to the *Voice of the Andes* radio station. A few miles from Quito, Ecuador his Avianca Airlines DC-4 got caught in a violent storm and slammed into the side of 14,000 foot-high Mt. Tablazo, killing everyone on board. Earlier that day, before he left the Miami airport, Glen Chambers had picked up a piece of advertisement off the terminal floor. Printed across the center was a single word, **"WHY?"** He scribbled a final goodbye note to his mother on the back of that flyer, stuffed it in an envelope and dropped it into a mailbox. Imagine what she felt like when, the day after she heard about her son's death, she opened that final letter from him. Staring up at her was the word, **"WHY?"** That's the question that haunts us all: "Why?" "Why me?" "Why this?" "Why now?" Maybe you feel like jumping off the stage today? Whenever you feel like giving up, I want you to remember one thing:

The angels are watching!

That's what St. Paul tells us today. He knew what it was like to want to give up. The whole world was trying to shove him off the stage. Most of the Christians he wrote to in Ephesus were slaves and converted Jews who had been rejected by their families and thrown out of their synagogues. Some were destined to be torn apart by lions in the arena. Surely they felt like jumping off the stage. They could identify with Rabbi Harold Kushner's question in his bestselling book on Job: "Why does God allow bad things to happen to good people?" Paul gives an answer in Ephesians 3:10&11:

"His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord."

1. Setting the Stage

St. Paul speaks the language of the stage. The theater was significant in the Greek culture of the First Century. Every city had an amphitheater and troupe of actors. The city of Ephesus was famous for the sophistication of her theatrical productions. She was the *Broadway* of her day.

St. Paul is telling us that the whole world is a stage on which we are all players. We've all had those humiliating moments when we've been thrust

onto center stage, only to mess up. We know what it is like to hear the catcall, “Hey kid, get off the stage.” But St. Paul doesn’t want us to play to the audience in this world, or worry about what the critics in this life say about us. Each of us has a far bigger role, before a far more significant audience, with cosmic importance: the role of a lifetime on center stage at the *Theater of the Angels*. Look at how the Apostle sets the stage:

1) The Playwright

Verse ten begins with these words: “His intent...” God has *intent*. Verse 11 calls it “...his eternal purpose...” Because his purpose is *eternal*, it never changes. God doesn’t make up the story as he goes along. The script was set before the world was ever created. Everything that happens in history is *His* story. Everything that takes place in your life is also *His* story. Nothing is meaningless. No experience is worthless. No mistake is wasted. No sin is unredeemable. And no moment is insignificant. When you look back over the story of your life, it will be seamless in its perfection even though you botched some lines, missed too many cues, and messed up a few scenes.

2) The Players

Who are the players on center stage, acting out this drama that has been written by God? Look again at verse ten: “His intent was that now, *through the church...*” Who is the church? It’s the people who have committed their lives to Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord. Together we are the church. Individually, as we live our lives out in the world, each of us is the church. He has put you on the stage of life—whether you are a virtuoso or can only play “chopsticks.” He has written a part for you to play, whether you are in the shadows or the spotlight. Every moment of your life has significance.

3) The Plot

What does the playwright want to show through his church (through you and me) as we play out our lives? Look again at Ephesians 3:10: “His intent was that now, through the church, *the manifold wisdom of God should be made known...*” The word *manifold* means that God’s wisdom has many layers, dimensions, faces, and facets. In the original language, the word for *manifold* speaks of things that are deep, mysterious, and beyond comprehension. No matter how many layers we peel back in life’s mysteries, some things are too deep to uncover. Deuteronomy 29:29 says, “The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the revealed things belong to us and our children.” Ephesians 3:9 says that there are mysteries “kept hidden in God.”

How many times have you questioned why God does what he does? These mysteries have exhausted sages, tormented sufferers, and baffled saints. Even the angels are at a loss to comprehend the wisdom of God. Yet, St. Paul makes an amazing statement: Right now, through our life, God is revealing his mysterious wisdom in all its *manifold* dimensions. Whether your moment on the stage is a drama, or a tragedy, or a comedy full of pratfalls and flubbed lines, or even the theater of the absurd, every moment is of cosmic significance because it reveals something of God's wisdom.

4) The Audience

Paul saves the best for last in Ephesians 3:10: "His intent was that now through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known *"to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms."* When Paul uses the phrase *heavenly realms*, he is speaking of the invisible world where angels operate. Having written a script for our lives, God summons the demons from hell and angels of heaven to gather at the *Theater of Angels* to learn something of his glorious wisdom from *us*. Even in the most private, or mundane, or painful, or silliest times of our lives, the angels are watching to see what they might learn about God's wisdom. There are no trivial or throwaway moments. Suddenly everything takes on cosmic significance. In wonderment we say to ourselves, "The angels are *really* watching *me!* Let me show you some famous moments in the *Theater of Angels*:

2. Job on Center Stage

The suffering of Job has troubled theologians down through the millennia. We will never understand what Job went through, or even our own struggles, until we see it in the light of St. Paul's *Theater of Angels*. As the curtain rises, we see the main character come out on center stage:

"In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil. He had seven sons and three daughters, and he owned seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred donkeys, and had a large number of servants. He was the greatest man among all the people of the east." (Job 1:1-3)

Most scholars think that Uz was an ancient region in what is modern day Iraq. Perhaps Job was a contemporary of Abraham who hailed from the nearby city of Ur. Maybe Abraham passed the story of Job down to his children and it eventually found its way into the Hebrew Bible. But what's

important are the two key facts about Job: 1) He was very **rich**. Verse three says that he was the greatest man in the Orient. 2) He was extremely **righteous**. Later God tells Satan that there is no one on the earth more upright than Job. Because wealth and power are so corrupting, it is rare to see such a rich man who is also righteous. Obviously, Job is a trophy of God's grace. Like all of us, Job was born in sin. But somewhere along the line, God invaded his life and spiritually transformed him. And now God's glory shines through this man of immense wealth and power.

In verse six the protagonist appears: "One day the angels came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came with them." God asks Satan where he's come from. Satan replies in verse seven, "From roaming the earth and going back and forth in it." When you hear Satan's words, there is an echo of that warning in 1 Peter 5:8, "Be sober and vigilant for your adversary, Satan roams about like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." Can you hear what's said between the lines?

God: "Where have you been Satan?"

The devil: "I've been roaming the earth."

God: "Why are you roaming the earth, Satan?"

The devil: "I'm looking for one of your saints to devour."

God: "Have you considered my servant Job? He's the best I have."

God knows that Satan lives to destroy the works of his hands. He knows that, once he points out his grace in Job's life, Satan will go after this servant. In short, God is setting Job up. God has written a script that will unleash the devil on Job, turn his world upside down, and break his heart.

The devil takes the bait. The story turns on Satan's charge against God in verses 9-11. To paraphrase, Satan is saying, "Sure Job is righteous. You've made him rich. It pays to serve you. But let me take it all away, and he will curse you." Satan's charges are stunning: 1) People only serve God when it is in their best interest. 2) Therefore salvation isn't a result of grace alone. 3) If people suffer enough they will abandon God. 4) God can't keep those he's saved. The issue of Job's isn't "Why do the righteous suffer?" but "Will the righteous persevere?" The great drama of Job asks the question posed by St. Paul in Romans 8:39, "Can anything separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus?" Job's drama becomes ours: Can those redeemed by God take everything the devil throws at them, and still come out the winner?

So God turns the lion loose on Job. Job never understood what took place behind the curtains in heaven. Neither did his wife or friends. Most of the

book of Job is spent in endless dialogue as people argue about why Job is suffering. Only God and the angels know what's behind everything that drives them crazy with questions. But the question is never *why* we struggle, but *will* we triumph. In a few days, Job loses his fortune and children. Yet Job survives this horror with grace intact. At the graveside of his ten children he cries out, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised." (Job 1:21) Job passes with flying colors.

But God and Satan are not done. To paraphrase Job 2:4&5 the devil says, "A man loves himself more than anything. He might survive the loss of fortune and family, but let him be crippled, disfigured, or repulsive to others and he will break." What happens next beggars the imagination. Job is inflicted with oozing and itching boils covering his entire body. He sits abandoned on a pile of ashes, rubbing soot into his skin in a futile attempt to find relief. In his madness, he scrapes his oozing boils with jagged shards of pottery. The richest man in the world has been reduced to a bag of bones covered in a mixture of rancid pus, ashes, and blood. His agony, humiliation, and grotesque appearance are indescribable.

His embittered wife is convinced that he would be better off dead. "Are you still holding on to your integrity?" she asks in Job 2:9. "Curse God and die!" What is *integrity*? Someone has defined it as thinking, saying, and doing the same thing. Integrity means that you walk the talk. Like Job, you will never know whether your faith is real, or God's grace is sufficient, until you have been stripped of everything that means anything. The greatest test of your integrity will come when you have been faithful to God, only to fall into deeper trouble. Integrity is tested when it no longer pays to serve God.

And now Job descends into the worst part of his nightmare. His friends show up to comfort him. Instead, they torment him with pious clichés that bring no comfort, unsatisfying answers to why God has allowed Job to suffer, and even accusations that Job's struggles are the result of some sin or lack of faith in his life. In these long theological debates between Job and his friends at the ash heap, he almost loses his mind. There are times when he is angry at God. He wishes that he had never been born. He has suicidal thoughts. He makes off-the-wall statements. But he never abandons his faith. After reading more than 40 chapters of this diary of human suffering, we come to the end of Job's drama.

The stage is darkened. He now sits alone on his pile of ashes and broken pottery, despised and abandoned by wife and friends. As the spotlight shines down on this grotesque cripple of a man, St. Paul would tell us that

the angels are watching. Demons, who howled in devilish delight as the devil wrecked havoc, are now cowed into silence at the resilience of this broken saint on the ash heap. Their master slithers off into the shadows, defeated again. Heavenly angels, who have never been sick or lost a child or been abandoned by those they loved, stand on tiptoe as they gaze with wonder at the glory of God. This is the manifold wisdom of God: a pile of pus on an ash heap, filled with the grace of God, has just defeated the most powerful archangel that our Lord ever created. As the demons slink away in humiliation, the angels of glory erupt into the applause of heaven.

3. Jesus takes Center Stage

And now the spotlight shifts forward 2,000 years to another ash heap outside of Jerusalem. There on a jagged pile of rocks hangs a man who has been stripped of everything. He is no ordinary man. He is the Son of God. He was once the richest person in the universe, and has remained the most righteous. Satan was unleashed on him, too. He lost everything, and was abandoned by everyone. There were times along the way, when he was overwhelmed by his sorrow. He is now so grotesque that people cannot bear to look at him. He hangs on that cross, a pile of oozing pus, mangled and bloody, as he bears the sins of the world. But nothing can separate him from his integrity. Filled with the very presence and person of God, this man of utter weakness will not abandon his integrity. The angels are watching. And again, like so many times before, the mightiest of the fallen angels is again utterly defeated. The demons again slink away in humiliation, and heaven applauds again the manifold wisdom of God.

And now you take your place in the spotlight

The spotlight shifts forward another 2,000 years. And you sit on your ash heap. In your weakness, you wonder why you are suffering. Others shake their heads in disgust. Some are shouting for you to get off the stage. And you wonder, "Will I make it?" Paul responds, "There is nothing that can separate you from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus!" The angels are watching, and they are learning something of God's wisdom as they see you triumph over everything that the devil and this world throw at you. And just when you want to quit, the Lord strides across the stage, reaches around you, and turns your pitiful attempts at "chopsticks" into the symphony of the ages. And if you could look into heaven from your pile of ashes and broken pottery, you might even see the angels dancing to that music.