

Sunday September 7, 2014

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Sunday Sermon: Does God even care?

Life can be hard, and sometimes it seems like God doesn't even care. When faced with difficult trials, many people have resonated with the book of Job—the story of a man who lost nearly everything, seemingly abandoned by God.

The glory of God is more important than your or my comfort. That is a statement with which all Christians will readily agree in theory. A Puritan prayer begins:

Lord of all being,

There is one thing that deserves my greatest care,

that calls forth my ardent desires,

That is, that I may answer the great end for which I am made—

to glorify thee who hast given me being...

That is a fine and noble prayer. But it has awesome consequences from which we naturally shy away. Of course, we say, there can be nothing more important than the glory of God. What Christian could possibly disagree with that expression of correct piety? And yet before long we find ourselves recoiling from the implications of this statement. The introduction of the book of Job in 1:1–5 portrays a world with which Disney would by and large be happy. It is a world in which the right people come out on top. We are ready, as it were, to go home happy, knowing it is all working out as it should. But then the action begins, with four alternating scenes in Heaven and on earth. The story is told sparingly and brilliantly, as a cartoonist might, as a few well-chosen lines on the page conjure up whole worlds of drama. In this drama we shall see that it is necessary for it publicly to be seen that there is in God's world a great man who is great because he is good, and yet who will continue to be a good man when he ceases to be a great man. Ultimately, in the greatest fulfillment of Job's story, we will need to see a man who does not count equality with God (greatness) as something to be grasped but makes himself nothing for the glory of God (Philippians 2:6–11).

Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and the Satan also came among them. The LORD said to the Satan, "From where have you come?" The Satan answered the LORD and said, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." And the LORD said to the Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?" Then the Satan answered the LORD and said, "Does Job fear God for no reason?"

Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.” And the LORD said to the Satan, “Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand.” So the Satan went out from the presence of the LORD. (Job 1:6–12) After the timeless introduction, which describes who Job was and what he habitually did, we read, “there was a day”. And what a day! On this particular day something happened in Heaven that would change Job’s life forever. The day began in what seems to have been a routine way: “the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD”. The expression “the sons of God” speaks here of beings whose existence is derivative from God (hence “sons”) but whose rank is superhuman. The expression literally translated “sons of God” “angels”. We meet them again in Psalm 29 (“Ascribe to the LORD, O sons of God,” Psalm 29:1) and in Genesis 6:2. They form a “divine council” or heavenly cabinet, and we see reference to this in Psalms 82 and 89.

God has taken his place in the divine council;

in the midst of the gods he holds judgment....

I said, “You are gods,

sons of the Most High, all of you.” (Psalm 82:1, 6)

For who in the skies can be compared to the LORD?

Who among the sons of God is like the LORD...

a God greatly to be feared in the council of the holy ones,

and awesome above all who are around him? (Psalm 89:6, 7)

As members of God’s heavenly cabinet, they come “to present themselves” before him. The expression “to present oneself” or “to stand before” means something like “to attend a meeting to which one is summoned” or “to come before a superior ready to do his will.” It is the expression used of the wise man in Proverbs: “Do you see a man skillful in his work? He will stand before kings; he will not stand before obscure men” (Proverbs 22:29). That is to say, he will be a senior civil servant or a government minister rather than just a local council employee. The same expression is used with apocalyptic imagery in Zechariah when the four chariots go out to all the world “after presenting themselves before the Lord of all the earth” (Zechariah 6:5). First they present themselves for duty, and then they go out to do what they have been told to do. This “day” that turns out to be so devastating for Job begins with a normal heavenly cabinet meeting. God summons his ministers rather as an American President might call his senior staff to an early-morning meeting in the Oval Office before sending them out for action. Only one member of the heavenly cabinet is mentioned individually: “... and the Satan also

came among them". The expression "the Satan" suggests that here "Satan" is a title, which tells us something about his role. The word "Satan" means something like "adversary, opponent, enemy." The noun is used to mean an adversary in other contexts as well. When the Lord stops Balaam in his tracks, he does so "as his adversary [satan]" (Numbers 22:22). When the Philistine commanders tell the Philistine king Achish they don't want David fighting with them against Israel, they say, "He shall not go down with us to battle, lest in the battle he become an adversary [satan] to us" (1 Samuel 29:4). Here in Job 1, it is not yet clear whose adversary the Satan is. It will soon become apparent that he is Job's adversary. We are not told explicitly whether or not the Satan is present as a member of the heavenly council or whether he is in some way a gatecrasher. It is sometimes assumed that because the Satan is evil he cannot be a member of the council and must have barged in uninvited. So the Lord's question, "From where have you come?" is read in a hostile voice ("What do you think you are doing here?"). But this is unlikely. The word "among" probably suggests that he is a member of the group.<sup>7</sup> There need be no hostility or implied rebuke in the question, "From where have you come?" Probably it represents something like a President asking a Cabinet secretary for his report: "Secretary of War, it is time for your report. Tell us where you have been and what you have seen." In 1 Kings 22 the prophet Micaiah vividly describes the same heavenly council: "I saw the LORD sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing beside him." Then as Micaiah describes the conversation in the council, "a lying spirit" speaks up and is sent out by the Lord to do his will (1 Kings 22:19–22). So there is apparently no inconsistency in "a lying spirit" being present in God's council. In the same way, it will become clear that the Satan is present at the council because he belongs there. His presence (and indeed that of other lying spirits and evil spirits) has been described as being analogous to the expression in British governance, "Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition."<sup>8</sup> They oppose the government, but they do so in ultimate and unquestioned subservience to the Crown. Their opposition is a necessary and good part of British governance. They in themselves are devoted to trying to bring the government down; and yet in spite of themselves their opposition serves a purpose in making the government better than it would be in the absence of opposition. In the same way the Satan will oppose Job and yet will do so in a way that strangely and paradoxically will eventually be seen to serve the purposes of the Lord. As Luther put it, the Satan is "God's Satan."