

HELP!

I CAN'T HANDLE  
ALL THESE TRIALS



Joel James

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## INTRODUCTION

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This booklet grew out of a series of sermons that I preached at my church in 2002. In the previous months, our small church had faced death, brain tumors, cancer, child molestation, assault, family break-ups, financial collapse, and a host of lesser calamities.

In the course of a few weeks I counseled a woman who had seen her husband shot to death before her eyes, another who had contracted AIDS, a rape victim, and a friend who was in the midst of an ugly church split. At the same time, my wife was caught in the grip of an illness that left her often unable to get out of bed and left the doctors groping for solutions. I didn't feel like Job, but I did feel like Job's pastor.

In the face of all that, our church asked the same questions you ask when you face calamity: *Who is in control? Why did this happen? How should we respond?* As sailors seek shelter in a hurricane, so we turned to the Word of God and dropped anchor in the book of Job. For us, its lessons were the difference between faith and doubt, between hope and despair.

In the book of Job, we met a God so great, so wise, and so loving that we didn't have to understand why so many bad things were happening. With God leading us, we were content to walk by faith, not sight. I pray that through this booklet you'll learn the same lessons in fear-of-the-Lord faith that we did.

# 1

## *Who Is In Control?*

**I**once read an interview with a woman whose home had been reduced to splinters by a tornado. Surveying the carnage, she told the reporter, “God wasn’t in this. God didn’t want this to happen.” Is that true? Is God swept along in the flow of catastrophes such as tornadoes, unable to intervene? Are the tragic events of our lives—disasters, disease, and death—out of God’s control? Those are important questions to answer biblically when you’re caught up in the whirling winds of a calamity.

Many Christians believe that Satan is in control of calamity. In their view, Satan is almost equal to God in power—certainly he excels God in trickery. As you go through life, you always have to be looking over your shoulder, never sure when God might have his back turned, allowing Satan to run you down with some disaster God didn’t anticipate.



Other people believe that *you* are in control of calamity, making yourself sick or causing a bad month for your business by speaking or thinking negative thoughts. In their view, if you think positively enough and have faith enough, nothing bad will happen to you.

Who is in control: Satan, you, or God? The first two chapters of Job provide a definitive, reassuring, biblical answer. When a tornado flattens your home, a disease your health, or a death your family—when everything seems out of control—*God* is in control.

## Meet Job

*There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job; and that man was blameless, upright, fearing God and turning away from evil.*

*(Job 1:1)*

Job was a real man who lived in Uz (an area of northern Arabia) during the patriarchal era—the time after the tower of Babel in Genesis 11, but before God gave the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20. Job was the epitome of what God wanted an Old Testament man to be. He was “blameless,” morally

complete—there were no stains, spots, or blemishes on the garment of his holiness. He was “upright”—straight as an arrow in all his ways. He was a fearer of God; he approached life with a humble, awed devotion to God. And Job habitually turned away from evil. Trying to get Job to do evil was like trying to push together the negative poles of two magnets—when it came to evil, Job always swerved away to the right or to the left. In short, Job was a bright trophy on God’s mantelpiece of grace.

Besides his impeccable character, Job had also been blessed by God in other ways. With ten children, including seven sons to carry on the family name, and a livestock portfolio second to none, it’s small wonder that the Bible calls Job the greatest man in all the East (1:2–5).

## Satan, the Accuser

*There was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them.*

(1:6)

Among the angelic beings reporting to God was one called *Hasatan*, literally “the Adversary” or “the

Accuser” in Hebrew. Later texts, such as Revelation 12:9, identify this being as the leader of the fallen angels, the devil, Satan, the same fallen angel who deceived Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. In Job 1, that lying, murderous Accuser had come for his regularly scheduled report to God.

*The LORD said to Satan, “Have you considered My servant Job? For there is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil.” Then Satan answered the LORD, “Does Job fear God for nothing? Have You not made a hedge about 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 put forth Your hand now and touch all that he has; he will surely curse You to Your face.”*

*(1:8–11)*

When God lionized Job, the Accuser immediately went on the attack. “Sure, I know all about Job. Why shouldn’t he serve you? You give him everything he wants. But let me tell you a secret about Job that you

don't know, God. Job is only in it for the blessings. Job doesn't love you; he loves what you give him. Take away his toys, and you'll see the real Job. Job likes sugar and bubbles, but when you stop giving him what he wants, he'll toss you aside like an empty soda can."

Satan was angry because God had thwarted his evil schemes by making "a hedge about [Job]" (v. 10). It was a hedge too high for Satan to climb over, too thick for him to cut his way through. In fact, Satan acknowledged that only one hand could cause calamity in Job's life: "But put forth *Your hand* now and touch all that he has; he will surely curse You to Your face" (1:11, emphasis added).

Who is in control of calamity? By his own admission, Satan isn't. Without God's permission, Satan couldn't even make Job stub his toe. In verse 12, God gave permission to Satan to attack Job, but he also set strict limitations on Satan's assault:

*Then the LORD said to Satan, "Behold, all that he has is in your power, only do not put forth your hand on him."*

Some Christians believe that God is taken by surprise or is helpless to intervene when Satan

is working his evil schemes. However, they don't get that view from the Bible. Job 1 presents God as completely in charge of Job's calamity. First, God was the one who pointed Job out to Satan, initiating the whole affair. Second, Satan could not lay a finger on Job's possessions until he had God's permission to act. Third, God strictly limited Satan, forbidding him to attack Job's health at this point. Initiation, permission, and limitation—Satan was completely under God's control.

## Further Evidence

Not just the book of Job, but the whole of Scripture proclaims the fact that God rather than Satan is in control of calamity. For example, Satan is not the source of physical handicaps, birth defects, or congenital diseases. God made that clear when Moses stubbornly resisted God's commission to lead his people because of his "heavy tongue."

*The LORD said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes him mute or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?"*

(Exodus 4:11)

Political corruption and violent crime are two calamities that many fear in the country of South Africa where I live. When Jesus was unjustly arrested in the middle of the night and was legally murdered the next day, who was in control?

*This man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death.*

*(Acts 2:23)*

Reflecting on the apparently out-of-control events of Jesus's arrest and crucifixion, Peter knew who had been in control. The indifferent, corrupt Roman authorities? The jealous, vengeful religious leaders? The ignorant execution squad? No. God and his predetermined plan.

Human words—positive or negative confession—also do not magically control good and bad. Jeremiah wrote,

*Who is there who speaks and it comes to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High*

that both good and ill go forth?

(Lamentations 3:37–38)

Solomon said it this way in Ecclesiastes 7:14:

*In the day of prosperity be happy, but in the day of adversity consider—God has made the one as well as the other.*

Neither Satan nor positive or negative confessions control calamity. God does. That is exactly what we find in Job. Until God gave his permission, Satan could touch neither Job nor his possessions. In fact, although we know Satan had a personal hand in Job's calamities, Job was never encouraged to handle his situation by binding Satan, casting off curses, speaking positive confessions, or by employing any of the other occult-like techniques so popular in some parts of the church today. The book of Job ends with Job back on track. What was the secret? He focused on God; Satan and demons are not even mentioned.

## A Day of Destruction

As we take up the narrative of Job 1 again, we find that in a day of frenzied destruction Satan engineered

four separate disasters designed to ruin Job (1:13–19). All Job’s oxen and donkeys were stolen and his servants slaughtered. All his sheep were destroyed by lightning and the shepherds incinerated. All his camels were kidnapped and their guardians massacred. But by far the most devastating calamity on that day of holocausts was the death of Job’s children, crushed by a cascade of bricks as a tornado leveled the eldest son’s house.

Job’s response to his ruin was a fear-of-the-Lord response:

*Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head, and he fell to the ground and worshiped.*

(1:20)

Tearing the robe, shaving the head, and falling to the ground were common expressions of grief in Job’s culture. Worshiping was not. But Job was an uncommon man.

*“Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I shall return there. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD.” Through all this*



*Job did not sin nor did he blame God.*

*(1:21-22)*

Job acknowledged that all he had received in life had been God's gift—none of it was deserved. And what God gave, God had the right to take away. The end of verse 22 literally reads, "Job did not ascribe folly to God." In other words, Job did not accuse God of making a mistake when he took the life of his children and his employees and left Job in financial ruin.

### **If At First You Don't Succeed ...**

Job had not folded under pressure as Satan had predicted. However, the Accuser was quick to find an explanation: God had not touched that which was most dear to Job, his own precious skin. "Strike his health, God," squealed Satan, "and Job will turn on you faster than a striking cobra."

*Put forth Your hand now, and touch his  
bone and his flesh; he will curse You to Your  
face.*

*(2:5)*

Notice again Satan's acknowledgment that God was in control. He begged God, "Put forth *Your* hand ..." Satan may do the actual deed, but he knows full well who is in charge.

*So the LORD said to Satan, "Behold, he is in your power, only spare his life."*

(2:6)

Having sought and obtained permission (but again with a critical limitation), Satan launched his second attack, striking Job with boils. Job was covered from head to foot with agonizing, swollen, burning, oozing sores. And the treatment was no party either:

*And he took a potsherd to scrape himself while he was sitting among the ashes.*

(2:8)

The "ashes" referred to the place where the household refuse was burned. Job's hospital bed was a garbage heap.

His wife encouraged him to give up the battle and die, but Job refused to adopt an attitude of bitter resentment:

*“Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?” In all this Job did not sin with his lips.*

(2:10)

## Who Is In Control of Calamity?

The opening two chapters of Job answer the question “Who is in control of calamity?” with unmistakable clarity. Job, Satan, and God all confirmed that *God* is in control. In short, God controlled the origin, timing, nature, and extent of Job’s calamities.

When life feels out of control like an airplane in a flat spin, it’s comforting to know that God’s hand is on the stick and that his feet are on the rudder pedals. To handle your calamity in a trusting, God-honoring way, you must be convinced that God is in control and that he knows how to land the plane.

But that leads to a second question. If God is in control, why did God allow Satan to pillage Job’s possessions, pulverize his family, and punch Job’s health in the nose? If God is in control, why does he allow bad things to happen at all? To answer that question, we need to consider the next section of Job.