

Hearing the gospel choir again. Always a blessing. And let me just even comment on the two songs. Why do we worship him? Because, just because he's God. Keep that in mind for today in my message. The storm is passing over. Sometimes we can look back and see the storm is passing over. We're through it. But there was a storm. God didn't put us in place where there are no storms. I just appreciate both the talent on display there, but even more so the message of those songs. And if it was up to me, I would have had you do another one or two.

Today, I'm going to start in Job, and we're going to end up looking at some things in the New Testament. If you remember, I don't expect that you do, but last time I was here, back in the spring, I spoke on Ecclesiastes. I was in Ecclesiastes, and now I'm in Job. These are a couple of books that I find myself in all the time and spending a lot of time in. Maybe that tells me something about myself, tells you something about me and where I am. But I teach these every semester now in wisdom literature, and I say to those students, some of you, the relevance of these Old Testament books to me is they're essential for us. We can't ignore these. We can't let these slip by.

What we have here in just even the opening chapter or two of Job is this incredible accusation that's being made. That's what I want to focus in on. I'm going to give us a little bit of context in Job chapters one and two. The 42-chapter Book of Job, I once had the privilege of spending the entire semester teaching on it. So there's a lot there. I am merely scratching the surface and just honing in on this one aspect of it that I think has great relevance for us today. This accusation.

All right, so let me back up a bit. I mean, Who is Job? Job is presented to us and introduced to us in this book as the greatest guy. He's the most righteous. He is the most upright. Who tells us that? The narrator tells us that. God tells us that. "Have you considered," in verse 8, "My servant Job, there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man." Why is he the one who is the focus of the book? Because he is the most righteous man in the world. He soon loses everything, as we'll see. Why he loses everything is explained in detail to us because we have these chapters. Job himself is never told in the book why this happened to him. You can read to the end, God comes and speaks to him, God restores him, but he never gets an answer to his question. Things just turn from everything being great to everything being miserable. Because that's part of a test. The test is, what is being tested here is the relationship between God and this one particular person, Job. But really, that test can apply to his relationship to all of us.

All right, so here's the accusation that Dean Gordon already read in verse 9. So Job 1: 9, "Satan answered, the accuser answered the Lord and said, 'Does Job fear God for no reason? Have you not put a hedge around him in his house and all that he has on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands and his possessions of increase in the land, but stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to his face.'"

Here's the accusation. I'll be talking about this even in more detail. But the accusation is, God, the only reason that he is praising you, the only reason he's following your lead and your commands, and he's being upright, and he's being righteous, is because you are buying him off. You're paying him, and so he serves you. This is a transactional relationship that you have with Job, the accuser says. All right, so just to give a little bit more of the story, remind us of it, probably a familiar one. God says, Go ahead, don't touch him, but anything else you can take away from him. And so in the subsequent verses of chapter one, we see everything. We've seen earlier how many just huge amounts of flocks and herds in the possessions in his day, all of them were destroyed. His servants were destroyed and killed. His 10 children were struck dead. So everything is taken away from him. All those blessings that did come from God taken away. How does Job respond? You can look there with me. I'm in Job 1, down in verse 21 then. He says, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." And all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.

The next chapter, it's seen, too, where the accuser, Satan, comes and says, Well, God, yeah, sure. He managed to pass that first test. But if you let me touch him, if you let me hurt him personally, physically, then he'll curse you. So God says, just spare his life. You can't kill him. So Satan struck him with these terrible sores so bad that he's taking a piece in chapter 2, verse 8. What helps him feel

better is he takes a piece of broken pottery and just scrapes his skin to make himself feel better. His wife gives him what maybe we would consider some good advice. All right, Job, don't you see how this is going for you? Just curse God and die. Be done with this. He responds to her. 2:10. "You speak as one of the foolish women he would speak. Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?" Again, in all this, Job did not sin with his lips.

So as I said, the accusation that is being made goes to the core of the relationship between God and his people. Is there anything real about that relationship, or is it merely transactional? The accusation is, God, you're giving him stuff, so he praises. If you take that stuff away, if you take away the blessings, he has no use for you anymore. It's not a real relationship. You're buying his praise. In what we read here, Job passes that test and displays that God's relationship is something greater than this, just this transaction. It's more than just him giving stuff, as we heard. Why do we worship God? Because just because he is God, that's What? That's another way of saying exactly what Job is saying here. "The Lord gives, the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

I want us to consider this accusation. I mean, it's nice we can say, Oh, yeah, this guy thousands of years ago went through this. He did a good job. Great. You go, Job. What if this accusation is turned against us, though? What if the accusation is, that we, 21st century American--I'm speaking to generally Americans or people who are currently in America--American Christians, you guys have it really good, and that's why you're faithful to God. If things turn bad for you. Your relationship is merely transactional. It's merely that you're getting stuff from God, you're seeing blessings from him, and that's why you praise him. How would we do in that type of... How would we hold up under that type of scrutiny and accusation? That's what I wanted to challenge us with today.

Now, one way that we can see, I think, a failure in that is in the prosperity gospel. When the prosperity gospel says, Worship God and he blesses you, with money and stuff and health. You can see there the picture that I'm drawing out of Job, a transactional relationship. I think that most of us here are not going fully embrace the prosperity gospel that what God really wants for you is for you to be materially wealthy. Notice, and I'm going to be saying this a number of times, there's nothing inherently wrong with material wealth. The question then is, what do you do with it? That would be one question. Then the other question is, are you expecting that from God? I don't think the Bible ever tells us that we should expect to be materially wealthy. If he happens to bless us in that way, then we are challenged, what are we going to do with it? But the prosperity gospel says, no, all of us, God wants all of us to be materially wealthy. Now, the way that works, just so you know, is the guy gets on the TV. The televangelist says, You guys send me all your money, and I'm going to be the first example of the prosperity gospel because I'm going to be really rich. And somewhere down the line, God's going to make you rich. You see how that works out. But anyway, I'm guessing that most of us aren't buying into that fully.

But here is another, to me, very concerning form that the gospel takes. And gospel, I don't mean just how you get saved, but what is the Christian life look like. And I will challenge us in this way that I think many of us as 21st century American Christians, are buying too heavily into a gospel that is a gospel of comfort, safety, and convenience. Not full prosperity, but we expect to be comfortable. We expect to be safe. We expect life to be convenient for us, and that those are things that we expect from God. I'm intentionally using that word expect. Nothing inherently wrong with comfort, safety, and convenience, just like with hope. There's nothing inherently wrong with those things, but are those the things that we are giving priority to? This is what I'm expecting God to give me. Where do those priorities come out? Listen to our prayers. What are we praying for? The challenge I want to bring to us is to examine that and examine our own hearts and where we are. Is that what we're expecting from God as 21st century Christians right here in the United States of America? We're expecting him to provide us with that comfort, safety, and convenience. Hear our prayers that sometimes center around those things. Again, not bad in and of themselves, but when they become more important.

So there are incredible spiritual blessings that God promises us. The blessings of eternal life, salvation, spiritual transformation, God working in us to transform us into the image of Christ, the blessings of being in Christian community. Notice that the blessings of the New that are promised us and that are intended for us are those spiritual blessings that will spill over into the rest of our lives,

but the spiritual blessings. It's the other things, the circumstances of life. It's when we think of God as his primary role is to solve our problems, make sure there is no storm.

God. That's what I'm expecting from you. It's expectations. He does work in our lives. He does solve problems. He does. Again, nothing that I'm talking about here is a bad thing in and of itself. This is a matter of priorities. What think is most important in our Christian life, what we're expecting from God. I'm not trying to pick on anyone. I'm not trying to point fingers. Honestly, I'm just looking around at my church, the church in America right now, and I'm saying, I have these concerns because I've been to many churches, I visit churches. There's a church in the past couple of years that I went to, and I was really troubled. I came out of this service and I said, "From beginning to end, this church service was oriented towards and around, 'We're praising God because he has solved our problems, because he has done stuff for us.'" There's nothing wrong with praising God for helping us. But when that's all the content, it's not we're praising God because he's God, we're praising God for who he is. No, we're praising God because he's doing things for us, and he's doing what we want.

What does that set us up for? It sets us up for, wait a minute. Right now in my life, maybe there are areas where he's not doing what I want him to do. When I pray, I'm not seeing immediate results. What does that do to... How do I evaluate my faith then if he's not doing those things? Do I stop praising him? Do I stop walking after him? Do I stop being one of his people? That's a challenge for us.

I want to get to a number of passages in the New Testament. I'm going to turn there and say, look at how the New Testament, starting with Jesus and then going to Paul, describes the Christian faith from a New Testament perspective. What should we be expecting from the life of being a Christian? Where are we setting ourselves up with false expectations that aren't promised us, that aren't part of the Bible, that we consider essentials of our faith, almost? I'm going to start in Luke 12. You can turn with me. I'm just going to read a couple of verses there. In Luke 12: 51-53, and I'm just taking snippets out because that's all we have time to do.

Jesus says, "Do you think that I have come to give peace on the earth?" Yeah, sounds good. "No," he says, "I tell you, but rather division." Here Jesus is saying, I came to bring division. "From now on, in one house, there will be Five divided, three against two, two against three. They will be divided, father against son, son against father, mother against daughter," and on and on. Where do we see this? We see this divisions over Jesus. Here's a prominent place that we can see it in Muslim communities. What happens when a Muslim person, raised in a Muslim family, practicing the faith, converts to Christianity? Their family will disown them. Their friends will shun them. Their society will even persecute them. They'll be pushed out. If you are in a Muslim community A Muslim in a Muslim community and family, coming to Christ is not going to solve any immediate problems for you. It is going to make lots more problems. It is going to cause divisions, it is going to cause conflict in your relationships because you are following Christ and the people around you aren't. It might not be as dramatic as that, but in this room, I'm sure some of you come from families that are non-Christian. You have friends in that when you came to Christ, that changes things, and it can cause divisions and conflicts. This is Jesus himself saying, Because of me, Jesus, there are going to be divisions, there are going to be conflicts. It's going to divide people. That's That's part of it.

I'll keep going. Another passage. If I turn the page over to Luke 14, Jesus, beginning in verse 25, he starts talking to the great crowds. Sometimes when Jesus has a big crowd, he gives them hard teachings. He doesn't make it easy. So he says in verse 26 of Luke 14, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple." So to be a disciple of Christ, you need to hate your family. I recognize that Jesus here is using exaggeration. I do not have to take this literally, but that doesn't allow me to dismiss this. What does this mean? Our love and devotion and loyalty to Christ must be so great that our love, devotion, and loyalty to anyone else in comparison is hatred. That's what he's saying. You need to put me above all else. And then he starts talking about counting the cost. So he gives these examples of someone's going to build a tower. They do the calculations ahead of time. How much is the material? How much is the labor going to cost? Because if I only build half a tower, I'm going to look really stupid. Counting the cost ahead of time. A king, before he goes out to the war,

says, Do I have enough men? Do I have the ability to win this war, or should I negotiate a piece? So Jesus says, Count the cost. And then he closes this section with this in verse 33. "So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple."

All right, how often do we hear in our gospel, whenever we tell the gospel, Come to Jesus, salvation is free. I'm affirming that, right? Salvation is a free gift. But if you become a disciple of Christ, it can be costly, can change your relationships. There are going to be expectations placed on you that you've never had before. Sometimes I think we buy too much into a marketing strategy with the gospel. We're just going to emphasize all the benefits. There are benefits to the gospel. Okay, again, not denying that. There are great benefits to the gospel, and we should spell those all out. But how often do we hear, But wait, you need to count the cost. If we're going to use a marketing analogy, I would suggest instead using the prescription drug commercial analogy, where they spend the first 10 seconds telling you how great it is, and then what are they mandated to do for the next 20 seconds? Tell you all of the potential bad side effects. That's really what this is. It's like there are benefits, but it could be costly and recognize that coming in. Again, we're not setting people up for a false hope. Again, that come to Christ and all your problems will be solved. Jesus doesn't say that, as we're going to see, that is not how it worked out for Paul in his life and ministry. Why should someone come to Christ? Because the gospel is true. Jesus did die for our sins and rise again. Jesus is ruling and reigning in heaven. And because of that, we owe him our allegiance.

That is the truth. That is the message. There are benefits, but there are also costs. And sometimes in time, it may look like the costs and the downside outweigh the immediate benefits. That's what Jesus is warning against, and that's what we'll see. Real quick. I say that as I don't do it that quickly. Jesus in the sermon on the mount, Matthew 5. Let me just read this, and some of these I'm just going to throw at you. I'm not going to have time to develop. "Blessed are those," Matthew 5: 10, "who are persecuted for righteousness's sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad. Your reward in heaven is great." How often in our services and we worship and we say, blessed are you, blessed are we, when we are persecuted. Quick example that I just read in a Christianity Today article about current Christian genocide in Nigeria. Just this year, militants have killed more than 7,000 Christians, abducted another 7,000 Christians in Nigeria. Over the past 16 years, since 2009, jihadists have destroyed over 19,000 churches, displaced more than 11,100 communities, and killed 125,000 Christians. That's just one place, Nigeria. When we, American Christians, think about persecution, I'm afraid Why did we too often think about it like this? We've heard the stories from history about martyrs way back in the past. Wow. We read something like the account, and we can, please, make yourself aware of what Christians are currently enduring in places around the world. We say, Wow, that's way over there. I don't know if I'm pointing in the right direction. Way over there. I don't know. Halfway around the globe and they're being persecuted. Wow. And then we say, but we're American Christians. God's not going to want us to be persecuted, is he? We've experienced incredible religious freedom in our nation. 250 years we're celebrating. God wouldn't want us to be persecuted, would he? And that seems to be, for me, an underlying assumption that we, American Christians, make is we've had it good. It's going to remain that way.

All right, now I'm going to have to really go quickly in order to just highlight a couple of things that I wanted to do from Paul. First of all, I'm just going to read this. Philippians 4. This is where Paul says, he's saying, You don't need to thank you for your gift. "I'm not speaking in need," Paul writes in Philippians 4, "For I've learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low. I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I've learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things. And he's describing these things through Christ who strengthens me." So he can face any and every circumstance through faith. As opposed to what I'm describing as this gospel of comfort, safety, safety, convenience, that I think we embrace too strongly, I would say Paul gives us instead a gospel of contentment. He has learned through the strength of Christ to be content, whether he is comfortable or uncomfortable, whether he has safety or he has danger, as we'll read about, whether life is convenient or very inconvenient. That's the gospel that he is living out and displaying, one that is a strong faith in God that he will see us through the storm. He doesn't just take it away. He doesn't eliminate it. He sees us through to the other side.

All right, so now, very quickly, 2 Corinthians 11. Paul feels like to defend himself against false accusations, he feels about doing this, but he says, I need to defend myself, and I need to tell you what I've endured as an apostle. So he gives this list. So in 2 Corinthians 11, let me just read from verse 23 and just Hear everything that Paul had to endure, not because he was doing the wrong thing, but because he was doing exactly what God wanted him to be doing and spreading the gospel to the known world throughout the Roman Empire. So 2 Corinthians 11: 23, "Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one. I'm talking like a madman." He doesn't want to have to defend himself, but he does. "So with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings and often near death, five times I received at the hands of the Jews, the 40 lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. A night in a day, I was adrift at sea on frequent journeys in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, dangers from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false prophets." He just goes on. "In toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, even without food, in cold and exposure. Apart from other things, there's the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak? And I am not weak. Who is made to fall? And I am not indignant."

Paul did not experience comfort, safety, and convenience. His experience was exactly the opposite of that. His normal experience was very inconvenient, very unsafe, very uncomfortable. And so I challenge us as American Christians, we think that somehow, and I really hear this or feel this as People are expressing themselves in different ways. We think we deserve that comfort, safety, and convenience. We think that that's almost our God-given right. If the apostle Paul, the greatest worker of the gospel after Jesus himself, who spread, who did the most to establish the Christian church, if he just described that accurately to us, God didn't just smooth his path, make it easy. Why didn't God do God has his reasons. You can continue reading and see about Paul's thorn in the flesh in which God says, I'm not going to remove it. My grace is sufficient for you. If God didn't smooth the path and make it comfortable and convenient and safe for Paul, why do we think, we so often think that that is our God given right?

How does this play out? It plays out in our priorities about the United States of America. There are many Christians who are currently saying, Here's what needs to happen. We need to make efforts to make sure that United States remains a country that gives us freedom of a religion that is friendly towards Christians. And that needs to be a great effort that we make to make America the place where it's safe to be a Christian. It's convenient to be a Christian. It's comfortable to be a Christian. We want to make sure that America is a place where it's easy for us to be Christians. God never promised us a nation where we would have that. We've been blessed, and we should be grateful that we have that. But there's no... In your lifetime, I don't know what it's going to look like. Instead of saying, We need to put all our efforts into making America a place where it's easy to be a Christian, I would suggest instead, We need to be making much greater efforts into the church being a people who are ready to bear up under anything, whether it's convenient or not convenient, whether it's comfortable or uncomfortable.

Can we be content through the strength of Christ in any and every circumstance. That should be our emphasis. Now, you could say, Well, can't we do both of those? To a certain extent, yes, but to a greater extent, no. Because that's us saying, at some point, which is more important? What is our priority? Where are we putting our hope? Are we putting our hope in the freedom that a secular government gives us, no matter who's in charge? Or are we putting our hope in Christ? I mean, that's where it comes down to at a time. Whenever we think that we need to put any and all efforts into changing America from the top down, there's a different way to change America, and that's the testimony of faithful Christians from the bottom up, bringing people to Christ. That's the topic for another day. If we think that that is most important, you hear these things, Christians saying, We need to make these changes in America, get the right people in charge, change the rules, change the laws, so that it smooths the path for the gospel. Because if we make those changes, changes, then the church can really flourish and be what it's supposed to be.

I've not heard many things less biblical than that. Jesus says, make disciples of all nations. He doesn't say, but first change the government. First, make sure that there's freedom to do that. That's

not the biblical pattern. And I say this, and even if some of what I'm saying sounds mocking, it's hard for me to accept some of things that people are saying in the name of Christ. You may not agree with everything I'm saying. I was going to say this upfront. You may not agree with everything I'm saying. My challenge for you is go to the Bible, go to Jesus, Read what I just read from Paul, evaluate for yourselves, because I can have my strong opinions. You're hearing little bits and pieces of them here in this area. But I have a genuine concern for the church here in America because of what we think is important, what our priorities are.

Let me bring it back to Job in the end, just to leave us with this challenge. The challenge, the accusation that's made against God and Job is, it's not a real relationship, God. You're buying his praise. The challenge for us, and what does Job do? Job, the rest of the book, He's not happy. All right, spoiler. If you read Job's pages, he's not happy with God. He challenges God. He doesn't understand what's happening. But here's what he never does. He never says, God, you stopped blessing me, so I'm done with you. He keeps coming back to God. He wants answers. He doesn't get the answers he desires, but he does hear from God by the end. But Job is able to say in the midst of just the immense suffering, and read it for yourself to see how... He lost everything. He is made miserable, and he is able to say, "The Lord gives, the Lord takes away, Blessed be the name of the Lord." Are we growing into the people? I'm not there. I don't know if I could respond to that. Are we growing into the people who can respond to adversity, whether on the personal, adversity in the personal level, in our personal lives, broader in our church community, are we growing into, and is that our priority, to grow into the people who are like Christ, who are like these other examples we have in the Bible, like Job and Paul, who are ready, that we would be ready to bear up under any of those circumstances that we can say, The Lord gives, the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.

Let's pray. Father, I do pray for us. I pray for each one here as they consider your word and they look around them. I just pray that you would give us wisdom. Help us to follow you truly. Help us to make sure that we are placing you first in our loyalty, in our worship, in our thoughts, and that our relationship with you would not be one that is merely transactional, but that we would love you out of a true love that you have enabled us to have because you have done great things.