

The Impatience (and Impertinence) of Job

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: Just about everybody knows the story of Job. You probably remember learning about him and his legendary patience in Sunday School. But even people who aren't particularly religious know the story. We've all heard of the remarkable way he clung to his faith in the Lord despite all the horrible things that happened to him, and how that has made him *the* biblical model for the way people should conduct themselves in the face of adversity. When hardship falls, to have "the patience of Job" is considered a great virtue. And we all remember too how Job's story ends. After his sad and grueling ordeal, the Lord restores to him more than twice that which he had lost. And that's good because we all like a happy ending.

What usually gets skipped over, however, is what happens in between. It surprises many people to discover that the book of Job has forty-two chapters, but that the story we know consists of just the first two chapters and the last six verses of the last chapter. That means that the vast majority of Job's story (thirty-nine and three quarters chapters) is virtually unknown and ignored. And that's a pity because that's where we find the real struggle in Job's life, and the unexpected way in which the Lord responds to it. And here's the deal: from time to time we all feel like we're in Job's sandals – tragedy suddenly strikes and we find our world falling apart. And we know how the story begins: with our current crisis – and we know how the story ends: it'll get better, if not in this life then in the next. But that doesn't tell us how to deal with it *in between*. Inasmuch as today's Old Testament reading is a portion of the "usually skipped part" of Job's story, exactly where we often find ourselves, I thought it would be a good idea to spend some time looking at the rest of Job's story.

But first a quick review of the facts. Job was a man who was abundantly blessed by the Lord. He had a big, happy family, and God had prospered him so that he had accumulated a great deal of wealth. Beyond that – and more importantly – he was a godly and righteous man—not that he was sinless; no, instead he had faith in the Lord's forgiveness, and he regularly brought sacrifices to God that he understood (in proper Old Testament fashion) were accepted by the Lord as offerings of atonement for his sin. As a matter of fact, so concerned and zealous was Job about wanting to be right with the Lord, that he would offer sacrifices above and beyond what was necessary on behalf of his adult children *just in case* they were involved in sins he didn't know about.

So the Lord was well pleased with Job; so pleased, in fact, that he presented him to Satan as the model believer: "Have you considered my servant Job? There's nobody else like him, who is blameless, and trusts in me, and strives to do my will." Satan scoffed at God, "The only reason Job loves and trusts you is that you've blessed him so much. Take all his stuff away and he'll curse you to your face." Paraphrasing here, the Lord said, "You're on. He's all yours; have at him – only keep your wicked paws off his person." So Satan went to work. In one day Job lost everything: his children, his servants, his flocks and herds; all of it gone. And sure enough, the Lord was right. Job just shrugged his shoulders and said, "The Lord gave, the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

So then the Lord said to Satan, "See, I told you Job was my kind of guy." Satan just brushed it off, "Yeah? Well, that's because he still feels okay. You hit him where it hurts, in his own body, and then he'll turn on you in a heartbeat." Again the Lord said, "You're on. Do what

you want; only spare his life.” And Satan struck Job with a horrible skin disease. From head to toe, Job’s body was covered with infected boils that would swell with fluid and burst to become oozing, running sores. Job was racked with pain. His wife, repulsed by his appearance and wishing to see an end to his agony said, “Job, give it up. Curse God for bringing this upon you and go ahead and die.” (*There’s sympathy for you.*) But Job responded, “Shall I accept the good from the Lord’s hand and not the bad too. No, that wouldn’t be right. I’ll take whatever he gives me and trust that he knows what’s best.”

Okay, that’s the part of the story we know. And that’s why we celebrate Job’s great faith and patience; but you know, it didn’t last. People can be remarkably steadfast in the short haul, but it’s awfully hard to keep it up. Over a long enough period of time, even a little pressure or friction can wear holes in the hardest stone. How much more the tremendous weight of grief and misery that were grinding away on Job’s tender body and soul? Eventually it became more than he could bear. We read how three of his friends came to visit him to offer their sympathy. They were Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar (three men whose parents obviously did not consult one of those helpful guides for choosing baby names). For several days they simply sat silently with Job, sharing his sorrow and showing their support by their presence. It turns out that that’s the best thing they did during their visit. And there’s a lesson there. Sometimes there are no adequate words; but you can say a great deal just by being there for someone.

It’s Job who finally breaks the silence. All of a sudden, as if the swollen cyst building up on his soul had ruptured, he lets fly a long string of complaints, cursing the day he was born, and going on and on about how much better it would have been for him to have been stillborn, or if he had died in infancy, rather than face all the miseries he now had to endure. Like a torrent of flowing poison, his words are the bitter lament of a suffering heart in deepest despair. And now his wounded heart lay exposed before his friends.

But rather than apply some healing ointment to it, Job’s three friends, though they mean well, only rub salt in his wounds. Each in turn, they say pretty much the same thing: “You know Job ...one thing we can always count on is the fact that God is just and fair. We know that he rewards the righteous with good things, and he punishes evildoers for their wicked ways. The evil never prosper. That’s the only way it can be. It’s only right. So, it’s pretty obvious, isn’t it, Job? You must be guilty of some particularly despicable sin. That’s why God has brought all these calamities upon you. Now, do what’s right: repent of your sins, return to the straight and narrow way, and the Lord will raise you up again.”

And I think we can relate to their argument. There is a tendency in all of us, when we see the rich, the high, and the mighty take a fall, to think to ourselves, “They probably had it coming. It’s likely they got to the top by hook and by crook, and now they’re paying their dues.” And too, when the fall happens to you, and people are thinking the same thing about you, but probably not saying it aloud. They don’t have to because there’s an Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar in each of us called *conscience* that searches through the index of our past sins to find the one (or the *ones*) that’s the likely cause of this day of reckoning we are experiencing. That it to say, when disaster strikes and we look to heaven with open arms to inquire, “Lord, *why* is this happening to me?” If we’re honest with ourselves, we could on go to make it a multiple choice question: “Lord, if it’s *this* sin from the other day, circle ‘a’; if it’s *that* one last week, circle ‘b’... and so on, until we get to the last one, “if it’s all of the above, circle ‘z’.”

That’s very likely the kind of self-examination Job went through during his long period of silence. But having considered it, he thought to himself, “No. It’s true that I sin all the time; but I also trust in the Lord’s forgiveness. And because the Lord has forgiven me, I am righteous and

blameless before him. I'm innocent in his eyes" – which, though it sounds to be a rather bold assertion, is exactly the same thing the Lord had said of Job when he presented to Satan in the first place. Remember the Lord didn't point out Job because he was an evil man, but rather because he was an exceptionally faithful and good one.

So Job argues with his would-be comforters, protesting his innocence. "You fellows are wrong. Now, I agree that in principle, if he is just (as we say he is), that God should reward the righteous and punish the wicked; but the fact is that that's not the way it always happens. I have seen the wicked prosper and get away with it. And I have seen the innocent suffer. I've seen dirty rotten scoundrels who rose to the top by mercilessly crushing everyone who stood in their way – and I've seen them live long and healthy lives, and then die old and well content. And I've seen very good people who have never hurt anyone who are poor, helpless, miserable, chronically sick, and constantly being robbed and taken advantage of. I *know* that sometimes the innocent suffer: I am living proof of it. I do not deserve these terrible things that have happened to me."

Job's three friends are shocked and taken back by his apparently self-righteous attitude and his stubborn resistance to what they consider to be their very helpful advice. They caution him, because what he's saying sounds a lot like blasphemy, virtually accusing the Lord of being unjust and uncaring. "How dare you speak like that! We know God is just. And we know he only gives people what they deserve. And since you are obviously experiencing the full measure of his displeasure, it can only be that you have committed some monstrous secret sin. And now you're compounding your guilt by refusing to admit it." It's at this point that the three friends offer suggestions as to what Job's secret sin might be. They hope to help him by bringing it into the light with a lucky guess – though from their guesses it's pretty clear they've long harbored certain suspicions about Job. Some friends, huh?

But despite all their accusations and arguments, Job maintains his ground. And he has some sharp words for his three companions. "You've come to comfort me in my misery? Some help you've turned out to be. Of all the awful plagues that have fallen on me, you guys are the worst." And it's true that Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar didn't offer much constructive help to Job; but one thing they did do is help him to clarify the true nature of his complaint. Job was, in fact, accusing the Lord of being either unjust, uncaring, or both. So there comes a point in his story when he stops arguing with his friends and takes his case directly to the Lord. "I do not understand, Lord. If I were guilty of some terrible sin, if that's why all these things have happened to me, then I would acknowledge the justice of my punishment and I would repent. But I don't understand. I trusted you, I worshipped you, I looked to you for every good thing ... and you've let me down. You've brought me to ruin. And now you refuse to answer me when I call to you. It's not right that the innocent should suffer so. *You're* not right for letting it happen to me. You are cruel and capricious in your dealings with me, and I demand to know why."

And so we see that not only does Job run out of famous patience, he gets down right sassy and angry with the Lord. But I hardly think any of us can point an accusing finger at him because at one time or another we've all felt the same way. Especially we who know the Lord's boundless mercy and love revealed in Christ, and who trust in the forgiveness he earned for us ... I mean we can understand why bad things happen to the unfaithful and the wicked. The Lord uses adversity to humble them and bring them to repentance. "But me ... I'm forgiven. I'm on your side; I'm trying to serve you Lord. Why are you letting this happen to me? In the midst on one of life's storms, we've all stood with Job, shaken our fists heavenward and screamed, "Why are you doing this? Why are you silent? You owe me an explanation!"

And as it turns out, Job got an answer – you might say he got it for all of us. But the answer was not what he was expecting. As Job watched and waited for the Lord to answer him, dark storm clouds formed on the horizon. He felt the wind increase, and he saw lightning flashes and heard the rumble of thunder. The storm swept closer, and the Lord spoke to Job from a whirlwind in the midst of the storm. Today's Old Testament reading is the beginning of the Lord's answer to Job's questions. But instead of simply laying out a cogent defense of his actions, the Lord fires back a series of questions for Job to answer, sixty-four in all, that serve to put Job's complaint in an entirely different light. But before he gets to the questions, the Lord begins by asking, "Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge?" The sense of it is, "You do not know what you're talking about, Job, and you have no business impugning my motives."

And to show it, the Lord continues, "Okay, smart guy, since you think you know so much and believe that you've found the fatal flaw in my perfect design for all things, where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? ... On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone? ... Who shut in the sea with doors ... and prescribed its limits?" They are questions that Job is given no time to answer; they just keep coming, each one proving that Job is way out of his league. He cannot hope to match wits with God. They demonstrate too that Lord who made everything so wondrously, and with such wisdom, care, and detail, knows exactly what he's doing. And that whatever he does fulfills his good and noble purposes.

But there is a deeper meaning to the questions. Job imagines that he knows what lies at the foundation of the world. He believes that it's God's justice upon which everything is built. He thinks that everything he experiences can be reduced to a simple question of right and wrong, and that God is responsible for maintaining the integrity of the system. Therefore, because God is good and just, he reasons along with all the best minds of this world that there can be no unfairness. Evil must be punished and righteousness rewarded, because to have it any other way upsets the very foundation upon which the universe stands.

But that's where he makes his biggest mistake. He begins with a false assumption. His worldview collapses because it's built on a lie. Because the foundation of everything is *not* God's justice, *it's God's love*. God didn't create the universe to rule over us as our judge with absolute impartiality. He created in order to love us as a Father. That's the foundation. And that changes the way we should look at everything. Because while love requires that overall justice be preserved in an absolute sense, it also makes allowances for compassion and mercy. It isn't always fair. Love requires that sometimes individual justice be set aside. What's strange is that Job didn't already see that. After all, it was how he worshipped the Lord. He brought sacrifices for his sin and that of his children apparently without really thinking about what he was doing. But at his own hands innocent animals were dying so that sinful as he was, he could live before the Lord in righteousness. That's not justice. But that was how Job lived.

And of course we understand that those animal sacrifices were only foreshadows of the ultimate sacrifice, when the Lord Jesus gave up his own innocent life for the sins of the whole world. That's not justice – but *that is love* – and that's the foundation upon which we live. The cornerstone of our lives is Jesus Christ and his cross where the Righteous One suffered and died for all the wicked. There God's justice was overcome by his love for you and me.

And so to our questions, "Why does it sometimes seem that life is unfair? Why do the innocent suffer and the wicked prosper?" We must respond that we could not live any other way. And now every time one of us suffers unjustly, we are living demonstrations of that truth; and we need to see these episodes as reflections and reminders to us of God's greatest display

of love and injustice upon which we depend for forgiveness and life eternal. And when we're standing in faith on that firm foundation, we'll also see the truth that in all things God works for the good of those who love him. He is in control of all things, and his wise and loving plan for our lives will always be for our benefit, even when it does not seem that way at the present.

You know, it's usually assumed that at the end of the book of Job, God blessed him doubly because of the fine way he clung to his faith. And then the moral of the story is: trust in the Lord like Job did and God will bless you too. But this morning we've seen that's not true. In the midst of his trial, Job wavered and fell. He became impatient and impertinent with the Lord, angrily accusing him being cruel and unfair. When the Lord showed him his error, he repented and God forgave him – after *that* he was blessed twice over. That's a much better ending to the story for you and for me because we're all a whole lot more like the real Job than the one of the short version everyone thinks they know. We too have become faithless and insolent in times of despair – which means that God's grace in Jesus Christ and his limitless forgiveness and love is ours too when we repent. When facing life's storms, may we always seek our refuge on that firm foundation. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!