

In the Case of Job

Job 1:1, 2:1-10

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There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.

One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the Lord. The Lord said to Satan, "Where have you come from?" Satan answered the Lord, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." The Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason." Then Satan answered the Lord, "Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives. But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face." The Lord said to Satan, "Very well, he is in your power; only spare his life."

So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord, and inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes.

Then his wife said to him, "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die." But he said to her, "You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips. (Job 1:1, 2:1-10)

Thank you, your honor.

May it please the court,

I've prepared an opening statement in this civil action brought by Job, resident of 2924 Maple Street, the Land of Uz, zip 56655, against the defendant, God, also known as The LORD, Yahweh, the Most High, the Holy One of Israel, and many other names.

People of the jury, you may not know my client, Job, but you already know his story.

That's because stories like his get repeated over and over and over again whenever good people suffer.

Oh, I admit to you that the losses that form the foundation of Job's civil action may be extreme

in comparison to what most of us will experience.
But, besides from that, his story is no different than yours.
Sometime, if you haven't already,
you too will taste the suffering that Job knows well.

Sometimes, it comes very early in life,
when we are children, and it makes us grow up
more quickly than what we should have.
And we grieve the loss of childhood, of innocence.
But, most often, we don't realize the extent of our losses until we get older.
And then, it comes steadily for the rest of our years.
Our bodies weaken.
Our minds become forgetful.
A close friend betrays us.
A relationship falls apart.
A routine trip to the doctor ends up anything but routine.
A loved one dies.

And we want a do-over.
We want to turn off the pain, to erase what has happened,
to push the undo button on our lives like we do
with typos on our computers.
Yes, we know that our actions or inactions
play a part in the losses that we experience,
but we also know that our losses are not all the result of our own doing.
We are vulnerable.
We get hurt.
We experience pain.
We suffer.

The question is, who is responsible for this pain,
this suffering, this loss?
Who needs to answer for it?
That is why we are here today.
And I say "we" because – make no mistake --
Job is one of you, one of us.
This is Job's case, but it very well could have been a class action lawsuit.
With Job, we want answers.
With Job, we want order.
With Job, we want justice.

My friends of the jury, I ask you to look at Job, my client.
Resist the urge to turn away from his sunken eyes,
his frail body, his skin covered with festering boils.
I want you to look at him -- look at him --

when you hear about his grief, his losses,
his despair, his pain, his worries.

Who is Job?

That's an appropriate question.

Job is a righteous man.

But don't be misled.

This case is not about Job's identity –
it's about God's.

Who is God?

That's the question that Job wants answered,
yet it's that question that no one allows him to ask,
or at least to ask without turning it back on him.

Who is Job, you still ask?

Well, read the news.

More shootings on our streets.

More innocent victims.

A United States drone drops a bomb in Afghanistan
in a dense residential area,
killing ten, include seven children.

More innocent victims.

Global COVID-19 deaths pass 5 million, 700,000 in the U.S. alone.

More innocent victims.

Flooding and mudslides and hurricanes and earthquakes.

More innocent victims.

Who is Job?

Job is someone, finally, with the guts to ask the question:
"Who is God?"

The facts of this case are simple and straightforward,
and I will only briefly review them.

The plaintiff, Job, is a resident of Uz.

Until this calamity befell him,
he was respected by everyone
and was known as a man of complete integrity.

People valued his counsel,
widows and orphans came to him when they needed help.

He feared God.

He stayed away from evil.

He had a good family.

Here was a father who offered sacrifices to God on his children's behalf,
not because he knew they did something wrong,
but just in case they did something wrong.

I tell you these things because you need to know this:

Job is not responsible for his losses.

And concerning those losses,
it should be easy to calculate the damages to his property.
He had seven thousand sheep.
Three thousand camels.
Five hundred teams of oxen.
Five hundred female donkeys.
There is no dispute as to what he has lost,
and you need only figure out the fair market value.

But how can you put a dollar value on his other losses?
Seven sons, three daughters.
Countless servants.
Damage to reputation, to goodwill.
His mental and physical health.
His faith.

Friends, Job is an innocent victim.
Oh, maybe he's not innocent in the sense that he's perfect,
that he's totally free from sin.
But he is innocent of whatever it was that has caused him to pay the price
that he has been asked to pay.

Our law books are filled with cases that support this general rule –
good things happen to good people
while bad things happen to bad people.
Proverbs 3, verses 9-10 says,
*Honor the Lord with your wealth,
with the firstfruits of all your crops;
then your barns will be filled to overflowing,
and your vats will brim over with new wine.* (Proverbs 3:9-10, NIV)

And consider Psalm 1, verse 6,
“For the Lord watches over the path of the godly,
but the path of the wicked leads to destruction.”

You reap what you sow,
you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours.
We can understand those rules.
If the world worked this way, we could live with it.
If the world worked that way, and only that way,
there would be no need to be here.
If God worked that way, we wouldn't be here today.
But look at Job, my client.
Look at him! Resist the urge to turn away.

Who is Job? He is someone who is innocent
of any sin that would bring about such extreme suffering.

Who is Job?

He is someone who deserves an explanation.

Who is Job?

He is someone who simply wants his grievances to be heard.

Who is Job?

That's what everyone is asking.

The better question is, Who is God?

Job wants an answer.

And my friends of the jury, so should you.

On behalf of my client, I thank you for your time and your attention.

I chose to begin my message this morning
in the way that I did because the book of Job
is basically a legal argument.

If you read through the prophets,
there's many examples of using the court metaphor
when God and Israel are in conflict.

Sometimes, God takes the role of prosecutor.

Sometimes, God is the judge,

In Job, God is the defendant.

Job wants answers for his suffering.

And he wants them now!

It's ironic to me that the book of James refers to the patience of Job
because, as you read through this book,
patience is not the one attribute that you might pick out for him.

Most scholars agree that Job probably was written
while Israel was exiled in Babylon.

This exile lasted two generations,
and it brought Israel's faith into crisis.

The center of Israel's life -- the center of all of life, in fact -- was gone.

The land, the temple, the palace, the whole sacrificial system,
and all the things that went with it -- gone.

Do you see why the book of Job would speak into a time like that?

The hottest question of the day was, "Why?"

Why did this happen?

There were multiple responses.

Some said they deserved it.

God has punished us for our sin, they said,
as the prophets had warned for centuries.

Others said that Yahweh was not as strong and powerful as Marduk,
the god of the Babylonians.

Still others questioned the very existence of God.

The prophet Isaiah said that the people should wait with hope,
for God was with them,
would not forsake them, and would bring them back home.

And then there's Job's author.

Job's author wasn't interested in those answers.

Job's author was interested in the question: Who is God?

And so the book of Job is sort of set out like a test case.

What if I told you that there was a perfectly righteous man,
who, like Israel, had been wealthy and powerful.

What if I told you that, like Israel, this man wound up losing everything –
his home, his family, his power, his reputation.

And what if I told you that the man rejected the explanations
that his friends kept repeating to him,
the same explanations that he himself once believed and taught:
that is, the reason bad things happen
is because of some sin that has been committed,
some evil that has been done.

If you take away that order, that understanding, what then?

Would the man still be faithful? Could he? Could Israel?

The first verse of Job reads like a fairy tale, a fable.

Once upon a time . . . okay, I added that part, but go with me here.

Once upon a time, "In the land of Uz, there was a man named Job."

And God, like a proud parent, says to the Satan,

"Do you see my man, Job, do you see how he loves me? "

"Of course he loves you", says the Satan.

"He responds to you as he does because you bless him and protect him.

He loves you as much as a 3-year old loves someone

with a pocketful of candy."

Now, it's important to note that, in Job,

Satan is not the devil of horns, hooves, and a pitchfork fame.

No, the Satan is the Accuser, heaven's prosecuting attorney,

whose role it is to report to God about the actions of humans.

God allows Satan to test Job.

And of course, Job passes, at least initially,

just as God thought he would.

Upon news that his children were dead and his property was lost, Job said,

"The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away;

praise be the name of the Lord."

And then, when boils cover his body and he is urged to curse God,
Job responded, "Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?"

But once you get beyond, chapter 2, you find different questions,
questions from someone who has had time to dwell in his grief, his loss.
Job is a man who spends seven days in complete silence,
and then breaks that silence by cursing the day of his birth.

I remember a conversation that I had with some friends a few years back.
One of my friends was struggling to figure out

what he thought about God after his two year-old son
was diagnosed with a disease that would last his entire life.

You know, these were questions that we didn't talk about when we were younger.
We went back and forth, asking and responding to some deep questions.

In a nutshell, his essential question was this:

If we give honor and praise to God for blessing us and protecting us,
what then do we say when our prayers are not answered
(or, at least in the way in which we would like)?

In the face of suffering, what can we say about God ?

We are going to be spending the next couple Sundays in the book of Job.
And so I spent most of my time today setting up the question that Job asks.
I do not want to do what Job's friends did and provide easy answers
so that we can just move past the questions that Job asks,
continuing on as we were.

But here, right at the beginning, there are some things we can say.

The first thing that we can say
is that God is big enough to hear our questions,
our doubts, our complaints, even our anger.

You know, a significant number of you
have experienced some significant losses over the past year.
Sometimes, our prayers are not answered in the ways we would like,
and the book of Job does not shy away from those emotions,
those deep questions.

That's one of the reasons why I feel so drawn to the book of Job.
It doesn't duck the hard questions.

In fact, it keeps the hard questions hard.
Sometimes, just being able to ask the question is the beginning of hope.

The second thing that we can say is that the problem of evil and suffering
is not something that we will ever "solve" in our present world.

Our primary task is not so much to give answers
to impossible philosophical questions,
but to feed the hungry, to give good news to the poor,
to welcome the stranger and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

It strikes me that the book of Job doesn't attempt
to answer its questions completely,
to wrap them up nicely with a bow on top.

And that leads to the third thing that we can say.
And it's something that we can say that Job could not.
It provides some clarity to at least some of his questions.
Job questioned the way God was ruling over the world.
Why do the innocent suffer?
Why do the wicked prosper? Does God care?
Is God even present and involved? Who is God anyway?

Romans 8, beginning with verse 31:

What then are we to say about these things?
If God is for us, who is against us?
The God who did not withhold God's own Son, but gave him up for all of us,
will not that God also give us everything else along with him?

Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love?
Does it mean he no longer loves us
if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted,
or are hungry or cold or in danger or threatened with death?

No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory
is ours through Christ who loved us.

And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from his love.

Death can't, and life can't.

The angels can't, and the demons can't.

Our fears for today, our worries about tomorrow,
and even the powers of hell can't keep God's love away.

Whether we are high above the sky
or in the deepest ocean,
nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us
from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord."

"Who is God?" Job asks.

It's not who Job thinks God is.

In many ways, the book of Job wipes the slate clean to allow us to have a new look at God.

And when we do that, we may not get all of our questions answered,
but we will a glimpse of the God who is with us
and revealed to us in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And that's something we can say.

Amen.