

Job's Bitter Complaint

Job 23:1-9, 16-17,

Sermon by Richard A. Kauffman

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Mark did a terrific job last week launching our 4-Sunday series on Job. He used his law background to good advantage. I wouldn't want to oppose Mark in a court of law!

Job asks the really big questions of life: Who is God? Where is God? Who are we as humans? Why is there suffering in this world? Why doesn't God do something about suffering in the world if God is a loving and all-powerful God?

But I've been asking a very different kind of question about Job, one that's more literary than theological. **Is Job a sympathetic figure?** A sympathetic figure or character in fiction is one with whom the reader identifies, cares about, wants things to turn out okay for that figure.

A sympathetic figure according to whom? To us? Do you consider Job a sympathetic figure? Do you identify with him, like him, wish for his well-being? God? Did God see Job as a sympathetic character or perhaps more as a whining, pathetic figure? His friends, that is, his accusers—did they see Job as a sympathetic figure?

Eliphaz, in particular, laid the blame on Job for his own plight. He hardly saw Job as a sympathetic character. Hear these words from Eliphaz to Job in the chapter right before our lectionary text for today:

“You're a first-class moral failure,
because there's no end to your sins.
When people came to you for help,
you took the shirts off their backs, exploited their helplessness.
You wouldn't so much as give a drink to the thirsty,
or food, not even a scrap, to the hungry.
And there you sat, strong and honored by everyone,
surrounded by immense wealth!
You turned poor widows away from your door;
heartless, you crushed orphans.
Now *you're* the one trapped in terror, paralyzed by fear.
Suddenly the tables have turned!
How do you like living in the dark, sightless,
up to your neck in flood waters?”¹

Here is Job's catalog of crimes, according to Eliphaz. Job:

- takes clothes from the poor,
- withholds water and food from the thirsty and hungry,
- manipulates the legal system to advantage the wealthy,
- oppresses the widow and the orphan.

¹ Peterson, E. H. (2005). [*The Message: the Bible in contemporary language*](#) (Job 22:5–11). Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.

Job might not have been as much of a sympathetic figure as we normally assume, if Eliphaz's accusations are true.

William P. Brown, a Job scholar, does some deconstruction of the Job story: Job was a very wealthy and elite member of society. He was a slave owner; there was no way he could be as wealthy as he was in his context, were it not for his slaves. When he spoke, others remained silent out of deference to his privileged status. Sure, he lost everything, but he got everything back again in due time—and then some.

When his wealth was restored at the end of the saga, nothing is said about his servants being replenished, but Brown points out that he could not have managed all that wealth without slaves/servants. Job must have learned something from his dereliction, however: at the end of the book, Job decides to include his daughters, as well as his sons, in his will. That would not have been characteristic of the patriarchal culture in which this story is set.²

It seems clear: Job, wealth-wise, was one of the one-percenters. If he were alive today, he'd probably launch his own, private exploration of outer space.

But let's give Job his due: though once wealthy, he slipped into a life of destitution, a life lived on the margins, where he must have experienced what life is like for so many people in the world. Let's give Job his voice and listen to his bitter complaint (or rant):

"I'm not letting up—I'm standing my ground.
My complaint is legitimate.
God has no right to treat me like this—
it isn't fair!
If I knew where on earth to find him,
I'd go straight to him.
I'd lay my case before him face-to-face,
give him all my arguments firsthand.
I'd find out exactly what he's thinking,
discover what's going on in his head.
Do you think he'd dismiss me or bully me?
No, he'd take me seriously.
He'd see a straight-living man standing before him;
my Judge would acquit me for good of all charges.
⁸⁻⁹ "I travel East looking for him—I find no one;
then West, but not a trace;
I go North, but he's hidden his tracks;
then South, but not even a glimpse....³
God makes my heart sink!
God Almighty gives me the shudders!
I'm completely in the dark,

² William P. Brown, "Dismantling Job the Supremacist, *Word & World* (vol. 41, no. 3) Summer 2021

³ Peterson, E. H. (2005). [*The Message: the Bible in contemporary language*](#) (Job 23:1–9). Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.

I can't see my hand in front of my face."⁴

Job wants God to be his judge; he needs God to be his judge. Surely God, would declare Job innocent, a righteous man suffering unjustly—if only God would show up.

But this is not the way Job's friends understand his situation. They argue from his present predicament backwards, and conclude that there is something in his past that must be causing all his current pain and suffering. He should just humble himself and confess his sins. (Incidentally, there was a prohibition later in Jewish thought against attributing sickness to sin in the life of the ill.)

But God doesn't show up. Vs. 8-9:

- God is not there.
- Job cannot perceive him.
- Job cannot behold him.
- Job cannot see him.

God's absence in Job's experience is in such contrast to the Psalmist's sense of God's presence in Ps. 139:7-10:

"Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,"
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you."

But this is not Job's experience, not now, not soon, not until God appears to him in the whirlwind. God is absent; and Job is enveloped by darkness. Have you ever felt this way? Have you sometimes identified with Ps. 139, times when God's presence was palpable; and at other times like Job 23—God was nowhere to be found? I know I have experienced both!

Some of you no doubt have read Elie Wiesel's *Night*, the story about his father and he living in a concentration camp during the Holocaust. On one occasion some prisoners were accused of sabotaging an electrical plant. As a consequence, these prisoners were taken to the gallows and hung. One of the persons accused and hung was a young boy who was much loved in the camp. He died a very slow and agonizing death. The rest of the prisoners were forced to walk by the gallows to see the accused hanging there, probably as a warning to them. Behind Wiesel another prisoner cried out: "Where is God? Where is God

⁴ Peterson, E. H. (2005). [*The Message: the Bible in contemporary language*](#) (Job 23:15–17). Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.

now?” Elie Wiesel thought to himself, “Where is God? God is hanging here on these gallows.”

What did Wiesel intend to say? That God actually died? That he was no longer a live option for him? I don’t know what he meant. In the wake of the Holocaust, many Jews kept wondering, Where was God? Why did God let this tragedy happen? Some gave up their faith in God, while continuing to live as secular, non-observant Jews.

Let me tell you about Richard Liebowitz, a fellow graduate student with me. In a seminar on the psychology of religion we each had an opportunity to share our religious autobiography, briefly. When Richard spoke he talked about how his people came through the Holocaust. He so identified with his people, that it was as though he had lived through the Holocaust himself. But he was my age; we were both born right after the war. Richard came to the conclusion that to give up on the God of their forebears would be to give Hitler the final word post mortem. Hitler would win after all. So Richard and many of his fellow Jews go on believing in God and practicing their faith.

So what are we to make of Job?⁵

- He’s guilty of hubris/pride. His friends are sure of that.
- He’s obsessed with his own sense of righteousness. It reminds me of some Christians who are obsessed with their own personal salvation. They may claim to believe in justification by faith, but their preoccupation with salvation betrays the reality that they aren’t really entrusting their salvation to God and getting on with life and obedience.
- Job was certainly guilty of paranoia.
- He was despondent, to the point of despair.
- Still, in spite of all that he went through, he maintained some sense of personal dignity. It is this sense of dignity that kept him asking for his day in court with God.
- Finally, Job didn’t give up the faith. Despite his personal plight and pain, he kept on searching for God, wanting a personal meet-up with the Divine.

Take-aways for us?

- a. It is OK to take our complaints and our laments to God. It is better to have a contentious relationship with God than to have no relationship at all, or one of benign neglect.
- b. We should call for and work for justice, not for ourselves alone, as in Job’s case, but for others. Just remember, in this world we will likely not create a fully just world, but we can do acts of justice.
- c. We can be faith-full for each other when ones among us are going through Job-like experiences. Jews came to believe that during the long periods when God was silent, it was the rabbis’ responsibility to keep the Torah alive. We might say that it is the responsibility of the whole community of faith to keep

⁵ John C. L. Gibson, *Job*

alive the faith in our own secular age when many people don't think God is real or present.

- d. Recall Job's friends' silence, seeing his great pain and sitting in silence with him for 7 days and 7 nights (2:13). They exercised good pastoral care as long as they kept silent; they stepped out of that role when they tried to rationalize and explain his plight. They practiced a theology of presence!
- e. But as my friend Paul Keim, an Old Testament professor, said to me: there comes a time when silence isn't enough. Indeed, what then? We can ask the person who is suffering: What can we do for you? Probably the quotidian things of life: make casseroles; do laundry; make runs to the drugstore for prescriptions.

Whether Job is a sympathetic figure will depend on each one of us: how we perceive him, how we feel about him. In conclusion, I'd like to tell you two stories about real persons who are anti-Job figures, counter examples when it comes to responding to personal pain and suffering.

Years ago I read the memoir of a Catholic woman who got the debilitating disease multiple sclerosis. She decided that she wasn't going to spend time asking, Why me? Instead, she asked: Why **not** me? It's part of the human condition. Why should she think she's so special as to be exempt from it? Instead, she prayed that she much have the courage and grace to live with MS.

Some of you might know Gordon Dyck who, for a long time, was a pastoral counselor at Oaklawn. He was married to my wife's cousin, Judy Dyck. Late in life Gordon contracted ALS, the so-called Lou Gerig disease. Over time, persons with ALS lose complete control over their bodies and body functions and become completely dependent on others.

The chaplain at the care facility Gordon spent his final months happened to be a Mennonite, although this wasn't a Mennonite facility. She asked Gordon, What is your mission at this stage of life? Mission? Gordon asked himself. He'd become completely helpless. But being a reflective person, Gordon came up with a 3-point mission statement: he was going to graciously accept the care of his caregivers; he would be kind to people around him; and he would more freely share his core convictions with family and friends he really cared about. These core convictions had to do with a commitment to the way of Jesus, a way of peace and living in community.

These two people—the Catholic woman and Gordon Dyck—in my opinion are sympathetic figures. Models, really, of how to live in adversity and suffering.

CUTS:

1. Job may be a sympathetic figure after all. The catharsis of tragedy: we can have a vicarious experience by seeing a tragic play or movie. We concentrate our own fears and project them onto a sympathetic figure in the play or movie. It can lead to a catharsis. When we walk out of the theater and go back to the reality of our own lives, we can put our own pain and suffering in perspective.⁶ It's part of the human condition.
 2. The Jews came to believe that during long periods when God was silent it was the job of the rabbis to keep alive the Torah and help the community to not give up the faith.
 - a. But we're part of a community of faith that can uphold us at times when God seems distant and we're walking through the valley of the shadow of death.
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1. The problem of theodicy vs. Providence: or why God allows this to happen vs. where is God in the midst of our suffering and pain.
 - a. Theodicy: the problem tackled by armchair philosophers who may or may not care for suffering people. If God is both all-powerful and loving, then human suffering shouldn't exist. But this it does, God must either be not all-powerful after all, or he must not be loving. Suffering just offends their sensitivities and sensibilities.
 - b. Christian faith doesn't have a theodicy: it has a cross and an eschatology: God bears our suffering on the cross; and the tears and travails of this life will be overcome when the kingdoms of this world become the kingdom of God and of his Christ.
 - c. In my pastoral care experience, people of faith are less likely to ask the theodicy question than the Providence question: not why did God allow this to happen to me? But where is God in the midst of my pain?
 - d. But I don't want to overstate this point: the question of why there is suffering in the world—why we suffer—is a live and legitimate question to ask. It's at the heart of the book of Job after all. It is very legitimate to ask God, why? If we were to read on beyond the lectionary text for this morning, we would see that Job keeps asking, Why? Why me?

⁶ Robert Eliot Friedman, *The Disappearance of God: A Divine Mystery*

- e. He didn't reach the place like a Catholic woman with MS that I read about. "Why me? Why not me? It's part of the human condition." Pray for the grace and courage to live with the disabling disease.