

“The Patience of Job”

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Job 1:1-3; 6-12; & 42: 1-6; 10

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Whether or not you've read the book, I bet you've heard of the main character — Job.

The story of Job is a tale of Order, Disorder, Re-order. What goes through these phases of order, disorder, re-order is not just Job and his life but his faith and the faith of Jewish people.

If you have ever had the rug pulled out from under you; if you have ever thought “it wasn't supposed to be this way”; if you have ever been utterly lost because of loss and wondered if faith made any sense in the light of what you have experienced, then lean in, because there is something in this story for you.

I want to set the stage. Almost literally. Some have suggested that it's best to imagine the book of Job as a play on a stage. It has that kind of quality to it. Job is not history — there was no real Job and no one can find Uz on a map. It is more like folklore or legend, and those reading it in its context would have understood that. The opening lines could be like the beginning of Star Wars with the words rolling up on the screen: *"A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.... 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."*

The point of having a character like this is that because of his distance from the reader, Job is not a particular man but everyman. At the beginning and in the prologue, Job is not just everyman, he's superman. He's perfect. He is blameless and righteous in his faith. He is so perfect in his faith that even though he never sins, he makes atonement for himself and his family just in case he or they have sinned. He has perfect children in perfect symbolic numbers: 7 sons and 3 daughters. He is perfectly wealthy, owning 7000 sheep and 3000 camels, 500 hundred oxen, and 500 donkeys. But of course, all of that is about to change.

There is a heavenly debate between Satan and God about *why* Job is perfectly righteous – *is it because his life is so perfect, or because he is actually righteous?* Job is allowed to be put to the test.

You can picture on the stage the first messenger running in to tell Job that the Sabeans have attacked and all his oxen have been stolen, and then while that messenger is still there another messenger runs up with news the sheep have all been destroyed. In rapid fire, messenger after

messenger arrives to announce disaster after disaster: animals, servants, then all his children — gone. Job goes from a life that is perfectly wonderful to a life that is perfectly disastrous in about 30 seconds.

Job responds by tearing his robe, shaving his head and falling on the ground to worship God, saying: "*Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.*" And so Job remains righteous. Satan is then allowed to take his health away, but still Job does not curse God.

This is where this play seems to go off script. At this point, everyone would be expecting the scene to change back to heaven where God would say to Satan something like "See! He's still righteous, you owe me 50 bucks." God wins, Satan loses, Job gets his stuff back. Order is restored and everything makes sense. But that's not how it goes. God seems to have broken the rules and Job is not going to let it go until he gets some answers.

What do I mean that God seems to have broken the rules? The world view that was set up for the Jewish people (and I think many of us have this world view today) was that if you do good and are good, you will be rewarded. If you do bad and are bad, you will be punished. The book of Deuteronomy is set up like that and so is the book of Proverbs. If you follow these laws and worship God correctly you will be blessed; if you break these laws and break the covenant, you will be cursed.

Job does not know about the bet in heaven, but he's mad as all get out because he has followed those rules to a 'T' and bad things happened anyway. He wants an accounting from God on how this could possibly be.

The book of Job moves from this prose narrative at the beginning, from the set-up, into 40 chapters of poetry that is a dialogue between Job and his friends and Job and God, all trying to make sense of this calamity.

His friends at first play the part of good friends as they sit with him in his grief for a week, but then they open their mouths and claim to have all the answers. People who have lost loved ones, especially tragically, know all about well-meaning people giving easy explanations of why this has happened. Job's friends were like that. They have all the answers. The simple explanation, according to his friends, is that Job has sinned and somehow deserves this. Clearly, he is not as perfect as he claims to be and he should admit that and repent. Each of the three friends comes across as sympathetic and sincere, but they are each full-of-it. Just when you think the dialogue between Job and his friends has ended, a young man speaks up and for 6 chapters sings the same song as the friends but with zero tact.

All Job's comforters are worse than the chat sections on social media, blaming Job and having all the answers.

Again, it's good to see this as a play or a drama and to see the humour in it too. Job replies to his friends: "*I have heard many things like these; you are miserable comforters, all of you! Will your long-winded speeches never end?*" (Job 16:2)

Job's friends have religion, but they don't have faith. Job's friends have rules, but they don't have love, neither for Job nor for God. When they have a choice between relationship and religion, they choose religion.

Finally, God steps onto the scene. But instead of answering Job's complaint and cause, God responds with questions that can't be answered:

"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?" (Job 38:4-7)

God questions Job in a way that reminds Job and us, that God is God and we are human. God never does answer the question we all want answered which is "Why me?" or "Why suffering?" God affirms that Job is righteous and that his friends were no friends at all. But God does not answer why bad things happened to a good person because it turns out that God did not break the rules, because these were never God's rules in the first place. This whole paradigm, this whole world-view, where everyone gets what they 'deserve,' is a human construct, not a divine ordination.

God invites Job into a more mature faith, into a faith that is bigger and deeper than it was before. Set in the Old Testament, this is a faith that looks forward to the Christian witness. In Jesus we see that suffering and death are real and painful and not just reserved for those who we think "deserve it", but are a part of human life. With the incarnation, God becomes fully human, and in becoming human he takes on what is at the heart of humanity: frailty and suffering, along with great love, beauty and joy. In Job 42:6, Job says: "*I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.*"

In a week and half, we begin the season of Lent with Ash Wednesday. On Ash Wednesday we, like Job, remember that we are dust. One scholar has said that this section is Job saying: "I had heard of you with my ears, but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I will be quiet,

comforted that I am dust.”¹ This is not Job being beaten down, but rather Job waking up to who he truly is: human.

Do you remember the Narnia Chronicles, where children from England end up in the land of Narnia? There they meet the lion Aslan, who represents Christ. In the 3rd book, Prince Caspian, and the children return and Lucy, the youngest and the one with the purest faith is the first to meet Aslan. She remarks to Aslan that he is bigger than he used to be.

“Aslan” said Lucy “you’re bigger”.

“That is because you are older, little one” answered he.

“Not because you are?”

“I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger.”

Job, unlike his friends, loved God. When his experience in life didn’t make sense, he had a choice: to abandon God, or to abandon his small beliefs about God. Job chose to stay with God even though what he was experiencing didn’t make sense. In this way his relationship and his faith grew. He didn’t have all the answers but he had a faith that God was good and loved him.

In the final scene, God restores all of Job’s fortunes. But it’s worth pointing out that this is not just going back to how things were before. This is a new creation. There are some interesting differences: for one, Satan is never mentioned. He has disappeared, as if he doesn’t exist in this new creation. In the old world the sons are the primary characters holding lavish feasts, but in the new world his daughters are the ones who are named and given center stage. And, unusual for that time and tradition, Job gives an inheritance to his daughters as well as to his sons.

In this new world, Job has learned to trust the God he loves and to love the God he trusts.

This book of the Bible was written during the exile, at the time when Jerusalem had been attacked, the temple destroyed and most of the leaders and faithful people taken as prisoners to Babylon. They simply couldn’t make sense of why this had happened. They had a choice of digging in and staying with their old-world view of faith, or making their faith bigger. They could remain unmoved and say: “If we just follow the rules more strictly this won’t happen again”. Jesus met some like that in the Pharisees who were all about the rules, and he didn’t have very kind words for them.

¹ Thomas G. Long, *What Shall We Say? Evil, Suffering, and the Crisis of Faith*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), 2014. Location 1327.

Jesus asks us to trust and love God in the middle of our suffering and to allow our faith to be deepened. Faith that is a relationship will change you and it will hold you and fill you with life. This kind of faith does not have all the answers, but patiently waits for the time described in

1 Corinthians 13:

“For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” (1 Cor. 13:12-13)

When you enter into that relationship and you follow Jesus you will discover that, beyond and sometimes even through the suffering and death of the cross, there is life. There is fullness of life and a love that bears all things.

Thanks be to God. Amen