

The Passion of Job
Job 1:1-3; 2:1-10
November 1, 2009

Today we begin a series on the Book of Job. What is the characteristic most frequently ascribed to Job? Patience. The phrase “the patience of Job,” comes from the New Testament, the King James translation of the letter to James, chapter 5 in which the author is encouraging patience in suffering. Job is lifted up as an example, “You have heard of the patience of Job” (5:9). However, when we read the Book of Job itself, we find reason to question that characteristic.

Most of us are familiar with the *Reader’s Digest* version of Job. God and Satan made a deal that Satan could make Job’s life miserable. Satan bet that Job would stop loving God. God bet on Job. Job lost everything, his possessions, his family, his health. Job’s friends came by to try to cheer him up by telling him that he must have sinned sometime somewhere in order for this to happen. He should just confess his sin and get it over with. Job stayed faithful to God and was rewarded in the end.

But the real story is filled with gems, puzzlements, baffling statements, and screaming rage that is left out of the *Reader’s Digest* version. I encourage you to read the full book this month. Don’t expect it to be an easy read or to find easy answers. One commentator suggests that “the Book of Job may be the most feared book of the Bible.”ⁱ Even one of the leading publications on biblical interpretation acknowledged that in over fifty years it has published only a few articles on Job! Job invites us to wrestle with several questions of faith. We will likely not end up with complete clarity, but rather will delve deep into the mystery of faith.

To assist our understanding of this book, we begin with some clarifications. Job is a story; it is not history. It is a didactic story, a story to teach moral values. Most scholars date the story between the seventh and fifth centuries BCE. It was likely composed by several authors, each adding to the basic story at different times. The beginning and end of the book are a basic prose story about the man Job. In between lays elegant, sophisticated poetry, which is a dialogue among Job and his friends. The climax is a long speech of God. The poetry in between the prose may have been added at various stages by different authors.

Job is described as a man of virtue, faith, and integrity. He has been blessed with 10 children, and multitudes of livestock. Biblical numbers are often symbolic. The numbers used to describe his family and possessions symbolize the completeness and perfection of his life. Life is good for Job.

The story suggests that God has occasional high-level cabinet meetings with the heavenly host. One member of the divine council is *ha-satan*, known as The Adversary or The Accuser. Unfortunately the New Revised Standard Version

translates it as “Satan,” but a better translation would be “The Adversary,” who functions as a kind of prosecuting attorney. This is not the character of Satan developed later who is considered the source of evil and an opponent of God. The Adversary has a specialized function of seeking out and accusing persons disloyal to God.ⁱⁱ

One day at the cabinet meeting, the Adversary comes in from scouting out disloyal adherents of the faith. God has a particular fondness for Job and calls the Adversary’s attention to Job’s faith and goodness. The Adversary replies, “Does Job fear God for nothing? If you were to take away all his blessings, I bet he would curse you to your face. I bet that Job’s faith is really very shallow; when the going gets tough, he’ll abandon you, God.” God allows The Adversary to test Job’s loyalty, although he must not cause physical harm to Job himself.

The conventional wisdom is that the Book of Job answers the question, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” That’s not the original question in the book. The Adversary asks God, “Does Job fear God for nothing?” (1:9) In other words, “Why does Job reverence God?” Is Job’s love for God unconditional? Or is it dependent upon his circumstances in life? Does Job expect some benefit for his love and devotion to God? Is his reverence for God a “bargaining chip” in order to secure his well-being? The question posed by the Book of Job is very different than the cultural assumption. It is a heavy question for us to ponder: Is my love for God unconditional, or do I expect something in return for my devotion to God? Is loving God reward enough in itself or do I expect acknowledgment of my effort?

That’s one reason why I’ve called this message “the passion of Job.” One definition of passion is ardent affection or love. The test is of Job’s love for God. Does his love for God go deeper than the material and familial benefits which have been given him? How strong is Job’s love for God?

A second meaning of passion is suffering. The suffering of Jesus in his trial, beating, and crucifixion is known as the Passion of Christ. Similarly, The Adversary subjects Job to suffering in order to test his loyalty to God. Will Job continue to love God even in the face of great suffering?

The test of Job is administered. In one day Job’s livestock and children are all destroyed. Job responds to this devastating news with typical gestures of mourning. He tears his robe in grief. He shaves his head. He falls to the ground and worships. At this point Job does not utter a prayer of lament. Instead he speaks from the wisdom tradition. “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.” Underlying this saying is the ancient idea that possessions are a loan from God, who may require them back at any time. Job recognizes that his family and possessions were a gift of which he was a steward.

In spite of the agonizing grief he feels, he is able to bless God in gratitude for those gifts. The Adversary's prediction that Job would curse God is proven false.

In the second chapter, we heard the second conversation in the divine council. The Adversary is given permission to strike Job's body with disease, but to spare his life. Job's body from head to foot is infected with a miserable skin disease.

Mrs. Job finally interjects her feelings about this misery inflicted, for she too is a victim of this suffering. "Why is it worth keeping your integrity at this point? You deserve to curse God." In future chapters, we'll see that Job does agree with his wife and expresses his anger to God. But at this point he maintains his composure. "'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 persists in loving God in spite of his suffering. He does not understand his faith and religion to be a guarantee of security. He doesn't assume that God will protect him from tragedy because he has been good or because he belongs to God. That's the agony of love: it cannot ensure the safety of the ones we love so deeply. At least, that's Job's perspective in the first two chapters. We'll see another side of Job next week.

Gerald Sittser is a professor of religion at Whitworth College. One day his wife, four-year old daughter, and mother were all killed in a car accident caused by a drunk driver. His suffering was compounded eight months later when the driver of the other car was acquitted of vehicular manslaughter. The defense attorney was able to cast enough suspicion on the testimony of several witnesses that he was able to get his client off the hook. Sittser was enraged.

Yet over time he began to be bothered by the assumption that he had a right to complete fairness. In his book, *A Grace Disguised*, he writes, "Granted, I did not deserve to lose three members of my family. But then again, I am not sure I deserved to have them in the first place." He wrestles with the desire to live in a perfectly fair world. In such a world, he may never experience tragedy, but he also may not experience grace. He concludes, "To live in a world with grace is better by far than to live in a world of absolute fairness. A fair world might make life nice for us, but only as nice as we are. We might get what we deserve, but I wonder how much that is and whether or not we would really be satisfied. A world with grace will give us more than we deserve. It will give us life, even in our suffering."ⁱⁱⁱ

At this point in his journey, even in the midst of his suffering, Job also affirms the goodness and grace of God. Even in the face of great devastation, he loves God for nothing.

Throughout life we also confront tragedy, suffering, and great difficulties. The world is a mixture of light and dark, of good and evil, of joy and pain. Why

do we worship God – for nothing or for a guarantee or reward? Is our love of God unconditional? Or is it dependent upon our circumstances in life?

God's love for us is unconditional. Even if we choose to turn away from God, which we humans are prone to do, the door to God's heart is always open, ready to welcome us home. That's grace -- given out of God's passionate, affectionate, and devoted love for us. May we be so bold to love God even half as much in gratitude.

ⁱ William P. Brown, "Introducing Job: A Journey of Transformation," *Interpretation*, No. 53, Vol. 3, p. 228.

ⁱⁱⁱⁱ Carol A. Newsom, Commentary on The Book of Job, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IV, p. 347.

ⁱⁱⁱ Gerald L. Sittser, *A Grace Disguised* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996). Quoted in *The Christian Century*, January 17, 1996.

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