

"INTRODUCTION TO JOB"

(THE MESSAGE)

(Eugene Peterson)

Job suffered. His name is synonymous with suffering. He asked, 'Why?' He asked, 'Why me?' And he put his questions to God. He asked his questions persistently, passionately, and eloquently. He refused to take silence for an answer. He refused to take clichés for an answer. He refused to let God off the hook.

Job did not take his sufferings quietly or piously. He disdained going for a second opinion to outside physicians or philosophers. Job took his stance before God, and there he protested his suffering, protested mightily.

*"All I want is an answer to one prayer, a last request to be honored:
Let God step on me—squash me like a bug, and be done with me for good.
I'd at least have the satisfaction of not having blasphemed the Holy God, before being pressed past the limits.
Where's the strength to keep my hopes up? What future do I have to keep me going?
Do you think I have nerves of steel? Do you think I'm made of iron?
Do you think I can pull myself up by my bootstraps? Why, I don't even have any boots! (Job 6:8-13)*

It is not only because Job suffered that he is important to us. It is because he suffered in the same ways that we suffer - in the vital areas of family, personal health, and material things. Job is also important to us because he searchingly questioned and boldly protested his suffering. Indeed, he went 'to the top' with his questions.

It is not suffering as such that troubles us. It is undeserved suffering.

Almost all of us in our years of growing up have the experience of disobeying our parents and getting punished for it. When that discipline was connected with wrongdoing, it had a certain sense of justice to it: *When we do wrong, we get punished.*

One of the surprises as we get older, however, is that we come to see that there is no real correlation between the amount of wrong we commit and the amount of pain we experience. An even larger surprise is that very often there is something quite the opposite: We do right and get knocked down. We do the best we are capable of doing, and just as we are reaching out to receive our reward we are hit from the blind side and sent reeling.

This is the suffering that first bewilders and then outrages us. This is the kind of suffering that bewildered and outraged Job, for Job was doing everything right when suddenly everything went wrong. And it is this kind of suffering to which Job gives voice when he protests to God.

Job gives voice to his sufferings so well, so accurately and honestly, that anyone who has ever suffered - which includes every last one of us - can recognize his or her personal pain in the voice of Job. Job says boldly what some of us are too timid to say. He makes poetry out of what in many of us is only a tangle of confused whimpers. He shouts out to God what a lot of us mutter behind our sleeves. He refuses to accept the role of a defeated victim.

*Still, I know that God lives—the One who gives me back my life—and eventually he'll take his stand on earth.
And I'll see him—even though I get skinned alive!—see God myself, with my very own eyes.
Oh, how I long for that day! (Job 19:25-27)*

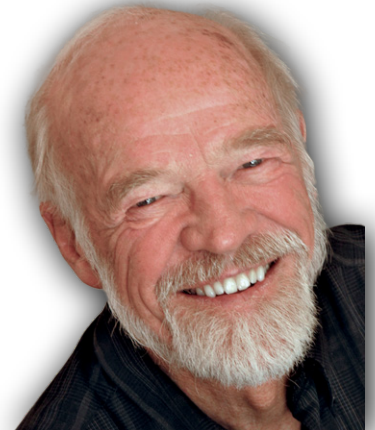
It is also important to note what Job does *not* do, lest we expect something from him that he does not intend. Job does not curse God as his wife suggests he should do, getting rid of the problem by getting rid of God. But neither does Job *explain* suffering. He does not instruct us in how to live so that we can avoid suffering. Suffering is a mystery, and Job comes to respect the mystery.

*But he knows where I am and what I've done.
He can cross-examine me all he wants, and I'll pass the test with honors.
I've followed him closely, my feet in his footprints, not once swerving from his way.
I've obeyed every word he's spoken, and not just obeyed his advice—I've treasured it.
"But he is singular and sovereign. Who can argue with him?
He does what he wants, when he wants to.
He'll complete in detail what he's decided about me, and whatever else he determines to do.
Is it any wonder that I dread meeting him?
Whenever I think about it, I get scared all over again. (Job 23:10-15)*

In the course of facing, questioning, and respecting suffering, Job finds himself in an even larger mystery - the mystery of God. Perhaps the greatest mystery in suffering is how it can bring a person into the presence of God in a state of worship, full of wonder, love, and praise. Suffering does not inevitably do that, but it does it far more often than we would expect. It certainly did that for Job. Even in his answer to his wife he speaks the language of an uncharted irony, a dark and difficult kind of truth: 'We take the good days from God - why not also the bad days?'

But there is more to the book of Job than Job. There are Job's friends. The moment we find ourselves in trouble of any kind - sick in the hospital, bereaved by a friend's death, dismissed from a job or relationship, depressed or bewildered - people start showing up telling us exactly what is wrong with us and what we must do to get better. Sufferers attract fixers the way roadkills attract vultures. At first we are impressed that they bother with us and amazed at their facility with answers. They know so much! How did they get to be such experts in living?

More often than not, these people use the Word of God frequently and loosely. They are full of spiritual diagnosis and prescription. It all sounds so hopeful. But then we begin to wonder, 'Why is it that for all their apparent compassion we feel worse instead of better after they've said their piece?'



The book of Job is not only a witness to the dignity of suffering and God's presence in our suffering but is also our primary biblical protest against religion that has been reduced to explanations or 'answers.' Many of the answers that Job's so-called friends give him are technically true. But it is the 'technical' part that ruins them. They are answers without personal relationship, intellect without intimacy. The answers are slapped onto Job's ravaged life like labels on a specimen bottle. Job rages against this secularized wisdom that has lost touch with the living realities of God, mystery, and Job comes to respect the mystery.

Then Job defended himself:

*"I've had all I can take of your talk. What a bunch of miserable comforters!
Is there no end to your windbag speeches? What's your problem that you go on and on like this?
If you were in my shoes, I could talk just like you.
I could put together a terrific tirade and really let you have it.
But I'd never do that. I'd console and comfort, make things better, not worse! (Job 16:1-5)*

In every generation there are men and women who pretend to be able to instruct us in a way of life that guarantees that we will be 'healthy, wealthy, and wise.' According to the propaganda of these people, anyone who lives intelligently and morally is exempt from suffering. From their point of view, it is lucky for us that they are now at hand to provide the intelligent and moral answers we need.

On behalf of all of us who have been misled by the platitudes of the nice people who show up to tell us everything is going to be just all right if we simply think such-and-such and do such-and-such, Job issues an anguished rejoinder. He rejects the kind of advice and teaching that has God all figured out, that provides glib explanations for every circumstance. Job's honest defiance continues to be the best defense against the clichés of positive thinkers and the prattle of religious small talk.

The honest, innocent Job is placed in a setting of immense suffering and then surrounded by the conventional religious wisdom of the day in the form of speeches by Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Elihu. The contrast is unforgettable. The counselors methodically and pedantically recite their bookish precepts to Job. At first Job rages in pain and roars out his protests, but then he becomes silent in awestruck faith before God, who speaks from out of a storm - a 'whirlwind' of Deity. Real faith cannot be reduced to spiritual bromides and merchandised in success stories. It is refined in the fires and the storms of pain.

The book of Job does not reject answers as such. There *is* content to biblical religion. It is the *secularization* of answers that is rejected - answers severed from their Source, the living God, the Word that both batters us and heals us. We cannot have truth *about* God divorced from the mind and heart of God.

In our compassion, we don't like to see people suffer. And so our instincts are aimed at preventing and alleviating suffering. No doubt that is a good impulse. But if we really want to reach out to others who are suffering, we should be careful not to be like Job's friends, not to do our 'helping' with the presumption that we can fix things, get rid of them, or make them 'better.' We may look at our suffering friends and imagine how they could have better marriages, better-behaved children, better mental and emotional health. But when we rush in to fix suffering, we need to keep in mind several things.

First, no matter how insightful we may be, we don't *really* understand the full nature of our friends' problems. Second, our friends may not *want* our advice. Third, the ironic fact of the matter is that more often than not, people do not suffer *less* when they are committed to following God, but *more*. When these people go through suffering, their lives are often transformed, deepened, marked with beauty and holiness, in remarkable ways that could never have been anticipated before the suffering.

So, instead of continuing to focus on preventing suffering - which we simply won't be very successful at anyway - perhaps we should begin *entering* the suffering, participating insofar as we are able - entering the mystery and looking around for God. In other words, we need to quit feeling sorry for people who suffer and instead look up to them, learn from them, and - if they will let us - join them in protest and prayer. Pity can be near-sighted and condescending; shared suffering can be dignifying and life-changing. As we look at Job's suffering and praying and worshiping, we see that he has already blazed a trail of courage and integrity for us to follow.

But sometimes it's hard to know just how to follow Job's lead when we feel so alone in our suffering, unsure of what God wants us to do. What we must realize during those times of darkness is that the God who appeared to Job in the whirlwind is calling out to all of us. Although God may not appear to us in a vision, he makes himself known to us in all the many ways that he describes to Job - from the macro to the micro, from the wonders of the galaxies to the little things we take for granted. He is the Creator of the unfathomable universe all around us - and he is also the Creator of the universe inside of us.

God answered Job from the eye of a violent storm. He said:

*"Where were you when I created the earth? Tell me, since you know so much!
And have you ever ordered Morning, 'Get up!' told Dawn, 'Get to work!'
So you could seize Earth like a blanket and shake out the wicked like cockroaches?
Can you get the attention of the clouds, and commission a shower of rain?
Can you take charge of the lightning bolts and have them report to you for orders? (Job 38:1,4,12-13,34-35)*

And so we gain hope - not from the darkness of our suffering, not from pat answers in books, but from the God who sees our suffering and shares our pain.

Reading Job prayerfully and meditatively leads us to face the questions that arise when our lives don't turn out the way we expect them to. First we hear all the stock answers. Then we ask the questions again, with variations - and hear the answers again, with variations. Over and over and over. Every time we let Job give voice to our own questions, our suffering gains in dignity and we are brought a step closer to the threshold of the voice and mystery of God. Every time we persist with Job in rejecting the quick-fix counsel of people who see us and hear us but do not understand us, we deepen our availability and openness to the revelation that comes only out of the tempest. The mystery of God eclipses the darkness and the struggle. We realize that suffering calls *our* lives into question, not God's. The tables are turned: God-Alive is present to us. God is speaking to us. And so Job's experience is confirmed and repeated once again in our suffering and our vulnerable humanity."