

“Receiving the Good and the Bad”

Job 1: 1-2: 13

January 25, 2009

Todd Smith Lippert

The Job we meet at the beginning of the book might get under our skin a bit. We're supposed to see clearly that he's this picture of perfection. He's upright, he's blameless, he fears, or reveres God, and turns away from all evil. Job is a goody-two shoes. Job follows all the rules. Probably drives 64 miles an hour on the freeway just to be safe. I'm sure he has a sparkling clean record on recycling too. There's never a box that he's too lazy to break down. Job's relentless.

And he's got it all. Job has 10 children. A big family means big power in the ancient world, he's the recipient of big blessing from God. And he has 10 thousand sheep and camels, 1000 donkeys and yoke of oxen, and lots of servants. He's the greatest of all people in the east we're told. He's a Bill Gates who attends church every week. If his church had three services on a Sunday morning, he'd probably go to all of them.

Now if Job is Bill Gates, his children are 10 Paris Hiltons. They party until they trash one house, and then they go on to the next one. But Job is so upright, so concerned about following God's rules that when his children are sleeping it off, Job gets up early and offers sacrifices for them, "I may not be able to control what my children do, but I can at least try to make it right with God." That's what Job always did. Job's this unreal character living this unreal life, but then things change at verse 6

The heavenly beings are before God and Satan is also there. Just a quick word about Satan in the book of Job. In our time, the common view of the spiritual world looks like this: God's up in heaven, Satan's down in hell, and God and Satan are duking it out for the souls of humanity. But this isn't who Satan is in Job. In Job, it's like God is the President, and Satan is one member of the cabinet. Satan's a key player in the God administration. Satan's job is to go all over the earth and seek out and accuse people who are disloyal to God. Think of Satan as a mix between the Attorney General and the CIA director.

At a heavenly cabinet meeting, God says to Satan, "where all have you been lately?" And Satan says, "I've been from one side of the earth to the other, sure are a lot of sinners out there." And God says, "Have you seen my man Job? You've gotta love Job. Now that's a human being. No one better. I've been creating humans for eons, and have never gotten it right. Adam couldn't think for himself, David had problems with self-control, but Job, he's a step in the right direction. He's blameless, he's upright, he respects me, he turns from evil, he's a man of integrity.

Then Satan issues the challenge. “It’s no wonder he reveres you, you’ve given him anything a human could want. Job only reveres you because he wants rewards for his good behavior. This is the only reason anyone is religious. The humans just use you for their own ends, God. If he loses what he loves most, his riches, his family, he will curse you and turn from you forever. God says to Satan, “you’re on. You may be right about some people, but you’re wrong about Job. Just don’t hurt Job.” And Satan goes out.

This exchange can be very troubling. If we see this conversation as one that literally happened between God and Satan, then we have an image of God that is not very loving or caring here, because God allows this suffering to take place to try to win a bet. If we can see Job as a story where the word of God may be revealed at any time and not just when the character God is speaking, then we might be able to see this introduction as the playful beginning it’s intended to be.

Once Satan gets to work, Job experiences systematic, tragic loss at a blinding pace. Like cars coming off an assembly line, one messenger after another comes to Job to tell him he’s lost his oxen and donkeys, his sheep and camels, his servants and all of his children. Before one messenger is done, another comes to tell him of more loss. We may laugh at the way the story exaggerates the speed of the loss, but at the same time, we know this story of loss is true. Those who have gone to New Orleans to work after Hurricane Katrina or have spent time in Spring Green or Avoca after last summer’s floods have seen people lose all of their possessions. Home foreclosures nationwide were up 80% this year and the hundreds of thousands of layoffs over the last few months are expected to keep the rate of foreclosure up. And sometimes financial loss coincides with personal loss and tragedy. Half of all bankruptcies are due to the cost of medical bills, disasters claim lives as well as homes, and sometimes chance is cruel and one loss seems to pile up on top of another and in months or weeks or days, our lives are completely changed.

In response to these messengers and this loss, Job stands up, tears his robes and shaves his head. These are the ancient signals of mourning. This is as expected, Job mourns. But then he drops to his knees and worships. He gives thanks to God. He praises. Isn’t that remarkable? Who is this weirdo, right? But Job isn’t in denial, he isn’t a glutton for punishment, he is authentically expressing sadness and gratitude at the same time.

Satan loses this bet. Job isn’t in it for the rewards. Instead, Job displays the power of a religious or a spiritual perspective. Job believes that everything belongs to God. He says as much, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, naked shall I return. Yahweh gave and Yahweh has taken away, blessed be the name of Yahweh.”

Now we see that this unreal guy living this unreal life has incredible spiritual depth. Job recognizes that everything in our lives rides on the grace of God. Everything at its root is a gift. For example, I didn't decide to be born, I just was. My parents had something to do with it, but I didn't choose. My life was just given. And then once my life was given, love was given to me. My parents cared for me, a community cared for me. As I've grown I've been blessed with other relationships and the opportunity to start a family of my own. Love continues to be given to me. This is all gift, it's all grace.

The same is true with possessions, our modern versions of oxen and camels. The land gives us the food we need to feed ourselves, as well as the materials we use to build our homes. We work hard to earn our paychecks to buy the goods we need, yet we've all been given particular gifts and abilities that allow us to do what we do well. We don't decide our DNA, it's just given to us by God's grace. We're so dependent upon God's gifts that we can't possibly count them all or be aware of them all. But our growing awareness will lead to a growing need to express our gratitude. That's ultimately why our church is here, and why there are mosques and temples and synagogues around the world.

And, what Job knows, is that at some point our participation in *this* good and gracious mystery is going to end. In one way or another, we will need to let go of all that we've been given. "Naked I came from the womb, naked I shall return," Job says. And this loss is sad, letting go of love and grace is sad. But as this awareness of all the gifts we've been given grows in us, a gritty gratitude will grow with it. And this gratitude will remind us that the reason we are sad is because we've first been given something that was good. And though we grieve the loss, we know that nothing can take away that experience of love and grace that we've had, and we give thanks. This gratitude fights for just a little space in our hearts as we grieve, and as it does this gratitude also becomes a source of hope, even in the worst of times. For if God has given so much to us before, then we start to trust that God can give to us again.

Satan's on the wrong side of the question. Job isn't religious so that he can get something from God. He's religious because he's already received so much from God. And even in the midst of unbelievable loss, part of him still needs to give thanks.

After all of this, there's another cabinet meeting and Satan goes back to God. And God says to Satan, "Well, my man Job didn't do too bad did he?" But Satan's not ready to give up. He's not ready to admit that people may be religious out of gratitude rather than selfishness. Satan says, "skin for skin. Possessions and family are one thing but at their core all human beings are ultimately self-centered, they just care about their own health and survival. Let me take Job's health too and then let's see what he says. God says, "ok, just spare his life."

Come on God, give the guy a break! But the book of Job is nothing if it isn't over the top, so here we go. Satan gives Job sores from head to foot. Afflicted with sores, Job grabs a backscratcher and goes to sit in the ashes. At the beginning of the book, Job is this picture of perfection, and now we see that he could have used some good pre-marital counseling sessions, where he could have learned some techniques for healthy communication, or at least been given a tract outlining the basics of the women's rights movement.

Job's wife says to him, "why do you persist in your integrity, just curse God and die." And Job says, regretfully, "you speak as any foolish woman would speak." Now he has had a bad day, so we might cut him some slack. But then he displays his gratitude again, and that shows us that Satan has lost the second bet too. Job says, "shall we receive the good at the hand of God and not the bad." Job is still aware of the grace he's received, and his gratitude is strong enough that it won't be eliminated by his sadness. It is still authentically expressed even in the midst of suffering and grief. His gratitude is holding Job like an anchor in the midst of a storm.

Next Job's friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, hear about Job's suffering and they go to see him. At the end of chapter two we see their only helpful action in the entire book of Job. They sit with Job and don't say a word for seven days. They share his suffering in silence. Most of the time, this is the most helpful thing we can do for a friend dealing with loss. Just being present. We want to fix it, but we can't. After seven days, Job's friends can't take it anymore and they start badgering Job with that famous and awful line, "everything happens for a reason." Job won't buy it and that will make for some more interesting reading.

But after two chapters, Satan's lost two wagers, and our friend Job has affirmed that our religion doesn't spring from our selfishness, but from our experience of God's overwhelming grace. And he's shown that even in the midst of overwhelming loss that gritty gratitude can hold. The gratitude doesn't make the sadness go away, but it can remind us that our sadness is there because we've first been given something or someone, and it can also help us trust that if God has given before, God can give again.

Amen.