

Joining the Suffering of the Innocent  
Job 21: 1-13, 22:1-11, 21-30, 23:1-7, 24:1-8  
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As we've been learning the last few weeks, Job is an upright, blameless guy, who's got it all: big family, big wealth, big power. Then he loses it all: his possessions, his children, his health. Through the loss, he shows his integrity and the depths of his faith, he mourns and give thanks at the same time.

In chapter 3, Job curses the day of his birth. Life is so bad he wishes he had never been born. The bad overshadows the good. Job expresses his deepest anguish and pain, and his friends are offended. Job reasons from his own experience, saying, "I'm innocent, but I'm suffering. Something has gone terribly wrong with the world. God held back chaos from the beginning, but God must have lost control. Now there's no rhyme or reason to anything."

Job's offended friends, don't start their reasoning from what they know of Job's story, they start with a doctrine they've been taught. Everything in the world must fit into this doctrine or it just can't be true. And the Biblical doctrine they've been taught is, "God repays all according to their work (psalm 62)." Job's friends say to him, "If you're suffering, then you aren't innocent. You've sinned and you're being punished. The world isn't chaotic, it's very orderly. When you do good things, you get good things. If only you had lived more like us, you'd be fine." (We might want to make a mental note here, telling our friends who are suffering that life would be better if only they had lived more like us, is not usually well received - a helpful tip.)

The author isn't subtle about the hypocrisy of Job's friends. It's sure easy for them to tell Job that it must be his fault, when they haven't lost a thing, haven't had to walk in his shoes, and clearly aren't trying to understand. In chapter 16, Job calls them a bunch of windbags and then says, "I also could talk as you do, if you were in my place; I could join words together against you, and shake my head at you."

This debate between Job and his friends still goes on today. Any place where the doctrines of those who have plenty are being proclaimed over the top of the stories of those who are suffering, this failure to communicate resurfaces. Today's debate can sound like this, "You're poor because you're lazy. The only way to get ahead in this world is to work hard, and buckle down. What's that you say? 'You can't find a job right now?' Ahh, there's always work out there for people who are willing to work."

Or it might sound like this, "You say you lost your house? Well, you know why that is don't you? You bought more than you could afford. That's why we're in this mess is people buying more than they could afford. What's that? You wanted to get into a better neighborhood with better schools? You could afford it before your hours were cut? Well you should have planned for that possibility. I have unexpected things come up too, you know. If only you did things like me, you wouldn't be in this mess."

Job's friends are pummeling him with the doctrine that God repays all according to their work, that you reap what you sow. There's some truth here but there's plenty of danger too. Theologian

Gustavo Gutierrez writes, “This is a convenient and soothing doctrine for those who have great worldly possessions, and it promotes resignation and a sense of guilt in those who lack such possessions. [The church sometimes supports] the doctrine that regards wealth as God’s reward to the honest and the hard-working, and poverty as God’s punishment to the lazy.” For 17 chapters, Job denies this view, but then in chapter 21, his focus shifts.

Until now Job has been focused on himself. He’s been focused on his suffering, on how innocent he is, and how unjust his situation is. But suddenly in chapter 21, his scope of concern widens. He starts to identify with the poor. He realizes he’s not the only one in this situation, there are others here too. And he can see clearly now, because he’s poor himself, that the poor are often innocent in their suffering, just like he is.

He starts by wondering about the wicked. In chapter 21 he says to his friends, “Bear with me and I will speak, then after I have spoken, mock on. [But] Why do the wicked live on, reach old age, and grow mighty in power? Their bull breeds and never fails, they send out their little ones like a flock and they dance all around.” Why do the wicked get all the breaks?

Job’s stumbled on to something. Now he’s wondering if there’s a different truth or another truth. Could it be that the sins of the powerful bring a disproportional amount of suffering on the most vulnerable? The more power you have the more damage you can do. When you have so much power, so much control, sinful actions have devastating and far reaching consequences.

Job’s friend Eliphaz knows where Job is going with this and he tries to cut him off at the pass. “Now Job, you will remember that you were the wealthiest, most powerful man around. What kind of steward were you with your resources? ‘Is not your wickedness great? You’ve stripped the naked of their clothing, you’ve withheld bread from the hungry and water from the weary. You’ve sent widows away empty-handed and the arms of the orphan you have crushed.’” This is why you are being punished.

This time Job isn’t listening to Eliphaz. He’ll defend himself later (we’ll read Job’s defense to this charge next week,) but he’s on to something and he wants to see where it’s going to take him. He says, “The wicked seize flocks and pasture them. They drive away the donkey of the orphan; they take the widow’s ox,(in other words they take the only money the poor have) they thrust the needy off the road, the poor of the earth all hide themselves. The poor reap in a field not their own and they glean in the vineyard of the wicked (day laborers). They lie all night naked, without clothing and have no covering in the cold.” Not only do the wicked, the powerful, take the little money the poor have, they also don’t pay them wages that provide what they need. Since Job is poor himself, he is now able to see clearly the pain and power of economic injustice.

This is a very important shift in the book of Job. Job no longer suffers in a bubble. He connects his suffering to the suffering of others. He identifies with the poor and suffering, understands their situation, their innocence, and then he feels the need to resist. Job starts speaking the truth. This is a very hopeful action.

In the book, Job is getting angrier and angrier at God, for now it’s like chaos has completely broken loose on the world. Nothing makes sense and Job wants God to speak and answer these questions. And God will in two weeks. We just have to wait two weeks. But now, I think it’s important for us to think about what Job has discovered, and for us to see how hopeful his response is.

One thing we've experienced in the last few months of the financial crisis is that the sins of powerful corporations and powerful individuals have devastating and far reaching consequences. With a lot of power comes the potential for a lot of damage. Certainly there are sinful individuals in the mix of this crisis, and we all have our favorite stories of wickedness. Maybe yours is Bernie Madoff and his 50 billion dollar scam, the Citigroup executives who wanted a new \$50 million dollar jet after they had received federal bailout money. My favorite is John Thain the CEO of Merrill Lynch who gave his office a 1 million dollar renovation while the company was cutting salaries and jobs. His new wastebasket was \$1200. I have a feeling that some of the things we throw in the trash at our house, wouldn't be allowed in his spendy wastebasket. But it's not just these individuals that have done us harm.

We are suffering from the sins of these powerful corporations as a whole, and from a corporate culture that pursues profit at all costs and despite any risk. And the damage from this isn't self-contained. This whole time Job's friends have been telling him that his suffering is his fault, as if God's punishment is like a precision strike from a laser beam. They don't understand that we are interconnected, that our sinful actions have consequences on others. Sometimes we simply suffer because of the sins of others. The arguments of Job's friends don't make sense of our current situation. The problems people are facing right now can't be explained by simply accusing the victims of poor judgment and poor planning. We're subject to the forces of an entire system that swirls around us. We don't live in bubbles, we're interconnected and the sins of these corporations and leaders have spread through the entire economy, affecting all of us. We've lost our collective feeling of economic security, anyone with money in the stock market has lost 40%, and many people, millions of people are losing their jobs, their houses and their ability to put food on the table.

We're all kind of like Job right now, some more than others, clearly. But in the midst of this crisis, God calls us to find the courage to respond like Job. If this experience can expand our scope of concern, like it did for Job, we will find God doing something very powerful in the midst of this suffering. This may sound like a tall order, but Job's response isn't unique, it happens. We see it most clearly in the wake of personal tragedy. A mother who loses a child to a drunk driving accident finds that she is not alone in her loss, and will join Mothers Against Drunk Driving to try to prevent that loss from happening to someone else. That's God's love transforming suffering. A cancer survivor or the family of a cancer victim will join one of the efforts to fund cancer research so that fewer and fewer people will have to go through that tragic loss. That's God's love transforming suffering. Families that have lived through the suicide of a loved one, will find themselves learning about depression and trying to educate others about depression, so that others might be served. That's God's love transforming suffering.

But Job opens his heart to more than those who have tragically lost a loved one, he opens his heart and his world to those who have lost their possessions, or who never had them in the first place. The way forward for us is not the way of Job's friends. It is not to pull in on ourselves and point fingers at each other. The way forward is to recognize the ways we are all in the same boat, and to band together. Maybe this means we increase our gifts to the food pantry. Maybe this means our contributions to justice work, through the church or through other organizations, continues despite the fear out there, because we haven't really lost anything yet. Maybe it means that we watch someone we know who's on the edge a little more closely, and ditch the politeness and ask the questions that need to be asked, "Are you ok? Do you need help?" Maybe it means that as churches we find there's mission that needs to be done that we haven't done before.

A world of tragic loss and injustice doesn't make sense, but Job's response to his suffering does. Job simply shows compassion for others. It's hopeful. It's love at work. It defies the power of chaos and greed. With God in the midst of it, compassion even begins to transform suffering. We ask for ears to hear and eyes to see, and hearts that are willing to join in the hopeful work. Thanks be to God, Amen.