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## WHEN LIFE SLINGS YOUR MARRIAGE ON A DUNG HILL:

### Three Lessons from Job's Wife on Ministering to a Suffering Spouse

By Fran Carver

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*Note to the readers: I have attempted to place Job's wife and her ministry to Job in a much more positive light than has historically been the case. While not wanting to "play loose with the text," I have nonetheless sought to counterbalance the negative image of her by drawing as much constructive counsel from her role as possible. I have also attempted to reconstruct her to speak to a modern audience.*

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#### Introducing Myself . . .

I really didn't think we would make it. We lost everything except each other, and sometimes, frankly, it seemed like we might lose that too. We lived on a "dunghill"—a place of refuse and isolation. The ash-heap. My husband got so sick, I thought he was going to die. I got so worn out trying to make ends meet and nurse him, I thought *I* was going to die. But by the mercy of God, we pulled through it.

Perhaps I should introduce myself. I'm quite aware you feel more acquainted with my husband, Job. He gets the main part in our story, and the whole book is named after him. The biblical writer didn't even bother to give you my name, simply calling me "Job's wife." (I understand this practice of referring to a wife by the husband's or father's name is still in vogue among you!) But I did get a name eventually. The authors of a first-century interpretation of our story, titled "The Testament of Job," named me Sitidos. The name means "bread," because I was always bringing bread to Job on the dunghill so that he would stay alive.

But even if you are already familiar with me, you are probably doubting I'll have much to teach you. After all, most of your Christian writers and theologians see me as a failure at best, devilish at worst. Wasn't it I who told Job to give up on God? Most of you know me by my little-understood comment to Job, "Do you still hold on to your integrity? Curse God and die!" (2:9). Interpreters of my role in this book have viewed this statement as a parallel to Eve's

tempting Adam with the apple. Famous preacher John Chrysostom, theologian Augustine, and reformer John Calvin have all compared me to Eve, who, according to them, obeyed the devil rather than God and dragged her husband down with her. These Christian thinkers call me a second Eve, an "instrument of Satan," "diabolical," and "the Devil's accomplice."<sup>1</sup> Popular devotional books designed for women identify me as a "failure" of a helpmate, a rotten excuse for a wife. Some writers have gone so far as to say I was Job's worst torture—that Satan allowed me to live only because "he could use [me] as an instrument with which to grieve and torture his victim."<sup>2</sup> I'm sure there are marriages in which spouses torment each other, like Archie and Edith on your TV sitcom "All in the Family," but ours wasn't one of them.

While there has been a rare writer, like William Blake, to point out my loyalty to Job, I feel that most people have unfairly condemned me. Has that ever happened to you? Have people ever judged you unfairly or misunderstood something you said in a state of bewilderment? Theologians have distorted what I was trying to say to my husband. But even when I reflect on that misinterpreted comment (2:9), I get confused about what I really meant, because I think I was trying to say a number of things. A well-known writer in your culture, Thomas Moore, whose books I've seen on display at a marvelous invention you call the "bookstore," says that the most meaningful conversations between partners are often confused and sometimes absurd.



When a partner expresses his or her deepest questions and most perplexed feelings, plain language is rarely the result.<sup>3</sup> So please be patient as I reflect aloud on what happened and how it might help you.

My troubled comment, issuing from the despair of my soul, came during a confusing time for us both. Just a short time before, we had lived in a beautiful home that we used to embrace our large and happy family as well as those less fortunate than we. My role before the tragedy was very clear: I cared for our children and grandchildren, kept up things around the house, and tried to be helpful to Job where I could—though he was very self-sufficient on account of his success. But then it happened: everything fell apart. We lost our home, our children, our livelihood, our health, our status, our security, our friends. With children and home all torn from me, and with a husband who was now totally dependent upon me, I had to take on brand-new roles while still grieving the loss of my family. I became the main breadwinner, caretaker, and family representative to the public. I was very scared and, to tell you the truth, felt inadequate for the task. I had no experience in those areas and no confidence in my ability to learn the new roles. But I'm finding out that spouses often have to take on new and difficult roles as their mates become incapacitated. They have to bring home the bacon as well as cook it. "In sickness and in health" sometimes means marriage partners will have to make major role adjustments if they are to endure the tragedies that will inevitably strike.

For us, there was no explanation for our tragedy. As one of your contemporary rabbis says in his book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*: "It didn't make sense, I had been a good person. I had tried to do what was right in the sight of God. . . . I was living a more religiously committed life than most people I knew, people who had large, healthy families . . ." <sup>4</sup> Our friends kept telling us there was a clear explanation, that God was punishing us for something Job had done. I've heard this explanation quite a lot in your culture, especially with reference to AIDS and substance addictions. But now I'm not really sure God works that way.

And, besides, I believed in my husband's integrity. I knew he was telling the truth when he told his friends he hadn't done anything. Now, some interpreters have taken my comment to Job to mean that I doubted his integrity; they say I was trying to challenge him by asking, "C'mon,

do you still pretend to be perfect and full of integrity? Look around! It's clear from the mess we're in you screwed up somewhere! Give it up!" <sup>5</sup>

### Lesson One: Be a Trustworthy Presence

But this is not what I meant. My husband had faults, of course, but I knew him to be an honest man; I trusted him. This is the first of three lessons I would like to share with you. Trust means everything in a marriage, but it has to be an underlying presence before tragedy strikes. You can't be working on trust and dealing with crises at the same time. If a wife is diagnosed with breast cancer, she can't be worrying that her husband is going to lie to her about the diagnosis or reject her as soon as she bares a surgically altered chest. If a husband starts to suffer from Alzheimer's, he must know that his wife will not simply stick him in a care facility and go her merry way. "A serious illness is marriage's unspoken fear. . . . Life is a dance you want to finish on the same beat," <sup>6</sup> but this rarely happens. Trust makes the dance thrilling nonetheless. Job and I had this sense of trust. I knew he was telling the truth, and he knew I would not leave him, even though he looked like road-kill and smelled like a septic tank.

### Lesson Two: Engage in Soul-Level Conversation

So, if I wasn't doubting his honesty, what did I mean when I told Job to curse God? Some interpreters maintain I was acting like a "typical female"—you know—getting all emotional and losing any sense of reason. Sort of like the current theory in your culture about "men from Mars, and women from Venus," these interpreters see me filling the typecast female role as the emotionally unstable woman who needs training wheels for her brain. But, much more than emotional hot air, my comment to Job is straight from the soul. Notice what I don't do: (1) I don't deny the problem, but bring it directly to the surface; (2) I don't blame Job for our problems, even though everyone else does; (3) I don't beat around the bush, but simply speak what's in my soul.

Regarding the first point, there is a tendency for couples facing a problem to ignore it. Sometimes, the problem arises from within their relationship: increasing emotional distance, sexual difficulties, spiritual deadness, lack of trust, the list goes on. At other times, the problem challenges the marriage from the outside: illness, job loss, death of a child,



care of an aging parent, etc. Whichever the case, the partners must name the cause of suffering with courage and not assume that it will “simply go away.” For example, my comment to Job represented the very core of our problem, namely, is God just? I mean, we had based our whole life together on the premise that God was just and that our right-

## When a couple faces crisis, technique must give way to heart, guts, and soul; protocol must give way to ur- gency.

teousness and prosperity were assured if we followed God’s laws. So when everything fell apart, this was our main issue: Have we wasted our lives by trusting in God? Why go on assuming God is truly just?

Often, as Job and I discovered, there are no answers. But this doesn’t diminish the importance of marriage as a place where the deepest questions of life can be asked and pondered. Our relationship was such that I didn’t fear admitting I had doubts about God. I felt free to explore the anguish of my soul with my soul mate. In this sense, marriage is “an arena in which the soul matures and ripens. . . . It is the creation of a vessel in which soul-making can be accomplished.”<sup>7</sup>

Secondly, I didn’t blame Job for our problems. This would have been very easy to do because all of our friends kept saying to me, “Surely he’s sinned, and this is God’s punishment.” I’ve seen other couples, finding themselves in inexplicable crises, begin trading accusations—especially when a child dies or is injured. “You’re the one whose relatives have cancer; mine lived into their nineties,” or “If you hadn’t made him play T-ball in the cold rain, he wouldn’t be sick.” People who lose a child writhe in hurt, but when partners attack each other, they only dig the wounds deeper. It’s little wonder that spouses who lose a child are statistically more likely to divorce than those who do not. Spouses also blame each other in cases of job loss. When a spouse is laid off or fired, accusations come easy: “If you hadn’t taken so many sick days to go shopping (or play golf). . . .”; “If only you had let me entertain my boss and co-work-

ers. . . .” But again, such blaming games tear us apart rather than relieve our anxiety.

In my case, I didn’t blame Job, but God. I had always believed in God with my heart, mind, and soul. The God of my faith had proven throughout our holy history to be just and all-powerful; how was I to continue believing in God as just and all-powerful when a raving injustice had struck down my family? I’ve heard that modern Jewish theologians have struggled with this same dilemma with regard to the Holocaust. For his part, Job responded, not by blaming me or denying my anguish, but by redirecting my search. He spoke on the level with me, as I had with him. We knew that blame should not be a part of our conversation.

Thirdly, I didn’t beat around the bush or get distracted with mechanics. I’m aware there is a heavy emphasis, in what you term “pop psychology,” on communication techniques and mechanical intimacy. Why, you even have sex manuals, as if the mystery of “becoming one flesh” were reducible to this or that position! While there is a certain place for developing the skills to enhance marital intimacy, mere mechanics can’t pull us through the mire and muck of real-life crisis. If I had been concerned with “technique,” I guess I would have prefaced my comment to Job with a compliment, as we are told to do by modern communication gurus. A compliment “lays the groundwork” for “getting our point across.” But marital soul-talk isn’t about “getting our point across” or pushing our agenda. No, when a couple faces crisis, technique must give way to heart, guts, and soul; protocol must give way to urgency. Perhaps no modern story of suffering depicts this principle better than the relationship between Joy Davidman and C. S. Lewis, pictured in your recent film, “Shadowlands.” At one point, Joy, who is dying of bone cancer, completely exposes her soul with no warning: “It’s not going to last, Jack. . . . I’m going to die. . . . The pain then is part of the happiness now.” *This* is soul-level conversation.

### Lesson Three: Learn from the Suffering Spouse

Towards the end of *Shadowlands*, when Joy has become bedridden and is suffering unbearable pain, C. S. Lewis (“Jack”) asks her to tell him what to do. He has done everything he knows to care for her, but at the end, feels helpless. Joy becomes his teacher and his healer. She responds, “Jack, you have to let me go.” Though he says, “I don’t think I can,” she believes he has the strength to, and

she guides him to think about his responsibility to her *child* as a way to let *her* go.

I, like C. S. Lewis, realized that I could learn from a suffering spouse. Even though ill and depressed, Job ministered to me by responding to my statement, “Curse God and die,” with a teaching moment. He pointed out I was using the language of a fool, a reference to Psalm 14:1 where fools say in their hearts, “There is no God.” Graciously, he didn’t call *me* a fool! Notice he also redirected me with a rhetorical question, leaving me to answer for myself rather than preaching to me. Too often, when we are caretakers for ill, unemployed, depressed, addicted, aging, struggling people, we assume they have nothing to teach us. But this is not so. Because of their suffering situation, they have escaped from what Thomas Keating calls the “false self” and have more to teach us than ever before. So let us care by *listening*. After all, the “Suffering Servant” is promised to be the greatest rabbi. And as you Christians say, God taught us the greatest lesson by sending his son to *suffer*.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 3 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 921; Abraham Kuyper, *Women of the Old Testament: 50 Devotional Messages for Women's Groups* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, [1933], 1961), 133–136; Herbert Lockyer, *All the Women of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.), 214.

<sup>2</sup> Kuyper, 133–134.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Moore, *SoulMates* (San Francisco: Harper Perennial, 1994), 29–30.

<sup>4</sup> Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Avon Books, 1981), 2.

<sup>5</sup> *Interpreter's Bible*, 921.

<sup>6</sup> Erma Bombeck, *A Marriage Made in Heaven, Or Just Too Tired for an Affair* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993), 242.

<sup>7</sup> Moore, 57.

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## “THE END CURRENTS”

*Let's build faith from new  
Cloth in our lives' end currents  
And know the future's left—*

*What can pull anyone from truth  
If patience works slow and sure—and if  
God pleases, people go on. God  
Lets those old lives  
Be the stuff of yesteryear  
With more chance to love.*

*Know as certainly as the Sun:  
Do not ignore simple beauty,  
Do not love less,  
Do not defend lust,  
Do not judge anyone,  
Do not grieve all day,  
Do not store wealth,  
Do not boast of idea.*

*And keep sharing, even if  
Living bruised presently we're  
Not buried in regret, nor in  
Long silence brooding over  
Old sin, but prepare the*

*Highest aim with friend and  
Song and love truth passionately.*

*Beginning resolution burns with  
Fire, not as water does slicked  
With oil, but with a holy,  
Unwearying fire, a cycle born in a holy time—  
And that birth burns out what in truth's  
Denied—look, the true vow  
Grows enough skin not easily shed  
If Faith's taken in.  
Tie this to a new life:  
Resolution burns a long line  
From dust to emerald—and knows  
What to praise.*

*So faith grows more real  
Than anything contrived from reason:  
Yet if questioned first, before having its  
Birth, faith disappears;  
The way is hard—owning to this,  
But no detriment hides which  
Course to take—what's real  
still marks the way home.*

KARL W. LOVE—