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FAITH AND JUSTICE

Messages from Job for Ministry

By Jan Hailey

When I go to the county jail where I have taught a Bible class for a number of years, I have learned to dread hearing the breathless assurance of a woman who has just surrendered her life to the Lord that her court hearing or her trial will go well or that her sought-for parole will come through. After all, she has turned over her life to God, and surely he will now spare her more jail time, a maximum sentence, an incompetent or uncaring counsel, or an unfair judge. I dread hearing this because, almost without exception, what follows is that on my next visit I will be asked somehow to answer for God: “Why? Doesn’t God care that I am so miserable? Doesn’t He care that I have repented and turned my life around?”

The assumption is that reward follows repentance—obviously, quickly. It is difficult to explain that the logical projection of this understanding of godly justice somehow makes man God’s manipulator. If I play his game, he will reward me with what I want. Of course, it is not so simple, but to the new believer, it ought to be.

When we serve as ministers of reconciliation to an alienated, suffering world, pockmarked by injustices of all kinds, we run headfirst into the issues of Job—not on an academic or abstract level concerning the nature of sin and evil or the goodness of creation—but questions about God found in the poetic dialogue. We deal “down in the trenches” with the justice issues to which Job speaks with great depth and intensity. God’s part in suffering, his power and reluctance to intervene in the affairs of men, his silence—all the great “whys” of the universe—surface again and again in the story of Job. We are called to answer these questions, if not for ourselves, for others who are less hesitant to ask them.

Attention to the book of Job has too often centered on the prologue and epilogue, the framework of the story, rather

than on the poetic speeches of Job, Job’s friends, and God. But herein lies the heart of the book and the study of Job—the nexus of two questions: (1) Is God fair? and (2) If God does not live up to our definition of *fair*, can we still trust and love him? Both of these questions are integral to faith—not the faith of belief, but the faith of devotion as expressed in the Shema, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deut 6:4).

These are by no means the only issues of the book of Job. Indeed, while most churchgoers are most familiar with “Job, the patient man,” as James 5:11 is generally translated, scholars tend to concur with Clines: “No one can say, and certainly not this commentator, what the Book of Job is all about, not even given unlimited space and time.”¹ But the issues of justice are the ones with which I have to deal: (1) when I teach incarcerated women who feel guilty, unworthy, victimized, angry, and sometimes betrayed by God; (2) when I teach future ministers who must balance ignorance, legalism, and the mystery of God within the tension of trust; (3) when I teach my children to trust a loving God, knowing as I do that suffering comes in one degree or another to all people, including my own children; and (4) when I face the hard questions for myself in order to maintain my own faith and integrity.

Our concept of justice is intimately connected with our faith. We long to prove to ourselves and others that God *is*, and not only that, he is absolutely concerned with humankind. Christians, especially new Christians, long for the telling signs of God’s existence and God’s favor by the working out of “all things” in a fair and equitable way in their lives or the lives of those they hold dear. We hear story after story about a believer, trapped in desperate circum-

stances, rescued by the hand of God or the intervention of angelic forces just in the nick of time to prevent a grave injustice. Such circumstances serve as signposts of faith in our lives, and I reach back in my memory to them when I am insecure or uncertain of the future. I would never wish to deny the validity of experiences or answered prayer. But with every story of blessed deliverance, there is another reality. As we are made to confront situations in which the intervention is not in time, in which the innocent die untimely deaths, and in which unbelievers call into question our belief or our God, we have the story of Job.

When we minister to others with the truth of God, the book of Job is *also* the truth about God that we must address for ourselves. Job's problem of faith is not whether he believes in God. He cannot *not* believe. Therein is the source of his dilemma. As Archibald MacLeish wrote in the play *J. B.*:

If God is God, he is not good
If God is good, he is not God.²

Job has faith in the God who has all power and could thus intercede for him and rearrange the circumstances of his misery; who could rescue him in a moment, but instead is hidden from him; who has all knowledge and thus understands Job's predicament and knows his pain. Can Job's faith include love and trust of that God? This is, as Yancey says, "*faith* in its starkest form."³ Buechner writes:

To be commanded to love God at all, let alone in the wilderness, is like being commanded to be well when we are sick, to sing for joy when we are dying of thirst, to run when our legs are broken. But this is the first and greatest commandment nonetheless. Even in the wilderness—especially in the wilderness—you shall love him.⁴

The value of the prologue and epilogue is not that they present us with a convenient synopsis of the story. Rather, this framework for the dialogue allows us to bear the same burden of faith with Job. Job has to grapple with the fairness of a God who would allow him to suffer seemingly unending pain and humiliation without understanding that he, Job, is bearing God's honor before all of heaven. God never tells him. We as readers are privy to the wager, but Job has to reach beyond his own understanding to accept God's justice.

We may well ask along with Pope, "Why the devilish sadistic experiment to see if he had a breaking point? . . .

The issue at stake in the testing of Job was not simply the winning of a wager, idle or diabolical, but the vindication of mutual faith of God in man and man in God."⁵ Part of Job's suffering comes from his lack of knowledge; we have too much knowledge. Can we continue to trust God, knowing what we know?

Ultimately, the prologue and the epilogue enable the reader to participate in the same intellectual crisis of faith. It is not "skin for skin" to us, but it could be. If we are to have the unshakable integrity of faith, we have to say with James Gustafson, "We need all to reflect on life's circumstances with the vigorous honesty and moral integrity of Job. He was wrong in his assessment of God's nature, but his honesty was not at fault. Smug complacency should not have a place in our theology either."⁶

The epilogue lets us know, should we misunderstand, that Job's friends were wrong. He was not at fault, and he is vindicated in a way that is satisfactory to Old Testament culture. The epilogue also serves to place Job squarely in the human condition. Job dies happy and full of years, but Job still dies. Death continues to be a part of the universe created by the God of order and power. Pope recognized the ultimate question of theodicy:

But how can a man put his faith in such an One who is the Slayer of all? Faith in Him is not achieved without moral struggle and spiritual agony. . . . The transition from fear and hatred to trust and even love of this One—from God the Enemy to God the Friend and Companion—is the pilgrimage of every man of faith.⁷

The dialogue takes us into the heart of the concept of justice commonly held to one degree or another by faithful people. The speeches of Job's friends and, to a certain extent, Job himself exemplify a *quid pro quo* understanding of what is right and fair. If we are righteous, God will bless us. If we are not righteous, God will curse us. Conventional wisdom agrees, "What goes around, comes around." Job's friends blithely assume that they understand how God works, and while Job rejects their judgments of his integrity and criticizes them for their lack of compassion, he shares this view in the beginning. This is also the argument the Satan poses to God. Individuals will give love back only so long as they can take good in return, but when the delicate balance of the *quid pro quo* is upset, the injustice of the situation will send humankind away from God.

The dialogue between Job and the three friends probes every substantial corner of *quid pro quo* justice. They use

all the arguments they can muster in their attempts to lead Job to knowledge and repentance: (1) the concept of an orderly universe created by a God of order; (2) the wretched condition of man the sinner (which pretends to inject the element of God's grace toward humankind in general); (3) the traditions of a religion that has this view of justice as its

As Job was delivered from himself through the greater vision of God, we too can be delivered from the pre-occupation of self-interest in our despair and pain

cornerstone; and (4) the common sense generalities of wisdom. However, they "rescued God at Man's expense. . . . They emphasized the great gulf between God and humanity. Ultimately, they succeeded in removing man from the domain of divine concern."⁸

Any help they could have given is offset by the raving injustice of their insults added to Job's injury. We see the trajectory of Job's descent, calculated to push him to the outermost limits of his "faith universe." From his amazing response in the face of his first great loss ("Praise God"), to his assurance to his wife that God is fair when his pain first became "skin for skin," we see every sign of a giant of faith. Then, as his integrity is relentlessly called into question, his rigorous honesty places him between being false to himself and continuing to suffer anguish and ridicule. He sinks from cursing his own creation to the conclusion that the God he has always loved and served has turned against him. God is "paradoxically both present and absent, an oppressive presence and a hiding friend."⁹

Job barely hangs on, in a cage of injustice, moving back and forth between having no hope and believing that there is still a Redeemer in heaven who will hear his case. His vision of God alternates from the *gibbor* (the warrior God) who has pierced and wounded him to the God of wisdom, the sage who will yet vindicate him. As his despair deepens, so does his view of God's unfairness. Not only is unfairness personally directed toward him, but there are other victims as well in this chaotic world.

Yet when Job can only hope that God will meet him in court (even if it means Job's death), he nevertheless clings

to faith. At first he longs for death and peace before he loses his faith. Then, when all hope is nearly gone, he conceives the idea of a witness or a Redeemer who may yet speak for him. In desperation he holds on to the God of the past who may yet vindicate him. In all his anger and pain, Job grasps for whatever shred of hope and trust he can find in his fractured picture of God. He may lack wisdom, but his tenacity is remarkable. Nevertheless, he is left, like we are, waiting in the gap for God to speak.

God's answer from the whirlwind has been called a confusing diversion. Job's many questions, as well as the great question of his suffering, seem not to be addressed. I would argue, however, that God does answer Job insofar as God can answer any man. The traditional understandings of God, the sage, whose wisdom has set up the universe and runs it according to divine order, and God, the warrior, who intervenes on behalf of Israel, have gone seriously awry for Job.¹⁰ God's universe has no discernible order. Everything is out of kilter. People who are in misery and desire death are not allowed to die. God is allowing the wicked to prosper. And worst of all, God is allowing this particular righteous man to suffer pain and humiliation in darkest ignorance. The warrior god, instead of fighting for his people, is attacking with arrows and poison the one who has faithfully served him, hunting him down perhaps to the death.

By his appearance to Job, God first of all dispels the doubt that he is not affected by the actions of humankind. He does appear, and Job can take that theophany as a sign in his favor. It may not be the intervention Job has wished for, but it is a response, and God's request that Job pray for his friends in time vindicates him before his peers.

It is God's speech, though, that provides Job with the only answer that can suffice. God takes Job through the grand design of the universe. It is not chaos but order, from the very beginning to the smallest detail. God's power is not used to promote disorder but to contain chaos in the form of Leviathan and Behemoth.¹¹ The design is there. The power is there. Job is asked by implication to trust that such wisdom and power evident in a universe without humans is also present in the universe of humankind.

Job never gets the whole picture. He doesn't know about the wager, he does not know how God's part in all this has played out, but he is brought to a new place. The end is worth the means, as Job comes to see that knowing the answers is not central to his relationship with God. The enlarged vision he gets from the theophany takes him out of himself and his concern for his own integrity and into the deep mysteries of God. Surprisingly, perhaps, it satisfies his soul. He can melt away and repent, and he can accept

himself as “dust and ashes.” As surely as Job’s fortune is given anew and better than before, Job himself is re-created, better than before, with a depth of faith that lives in grace.

God does the same for us in the dark moments of our lives: we can have the hope that he is making order out of chaos. And as Job was delivered from himself through the greater vision of God, we too can be delivered from the preoccupation of self-interest in our despair and pain. The great answer supersedes the smaller answers. We can add to this message of Job the assurance that Job’s great desire for a Redeemer, an advocate in heaven who makes sure God understands the human condition, is in fact a reality. Our knowledge of justice goes one step further than Job’s—God has played by his own rules. His son also suffered to bear his honor before all of heaven and earth.

One message of Job that helps us develop our faith is what it says about the difficulty of establishing blame for our suffering. Whoever has faith in God’s justice can forego establishing blame and either making self-righteous judgments or pursuing delicious vengeance. Establishing cause seems terribly important to Job and to his friends, but none of them is able to draw the lines of responsibility properly. The problem is simply too complex. God never gives them enough insight. Perhaps this says something to us about the importance of knowing responsibility for everything that happens. Finding out who is to blame is handy, because it gives a focus to our anger. It is hard and destructive to maintain unfocused anger, and maybe that is the whole point. God is the judge, and vengeance belongs to him. In the end, Job is satisfied without the clear lines. He is content to rest in God.

The dialogues also demonstrate the importance of wrestling with the fearful side of God. One can only stand in awe at Job’s courage to confront the connection between a God who is all-powerful and the suffering of a good man. That is an issue for us all if we are to grow in our relationship with God. The ultimate issue of faith depends upon our *will* to faith. It is always reasonable to believe, but never possible to prove—not by the natural world, not by the written word, not by the predictability of justice. Trust must walk hand in hand with belief. The ultimate issue of love also depends upon our will to love. It is reasonable to love, but never without the risk of loving without reward.

One of my friends, describing the point in her life when she lived with suffering, said, “I didn’t want to wrestle with the God who could do those things. I couldn’t say that I loved the God who could be responsible, directly or indirectly, for such misery in my life. But looking at this time, admitting that this was God, and if I wanted to love God, I had to tell the truth about God, was the beginning of my faith.”

The message of Job will not help people get *better*, but it will help them to begin a real faith and to love the real God. It is the story nobody wants to hear because it is painful—but, in the end, helpful—a “severe mercy.” It is not important because it makes us nice people who can get through a crisis, but because the message is the truth about God. What this truth gives us for ministry is our own personal testimonial, our own maturity of faith. When we can cry, “God, why?” and yet say, “I still stand with God,” our testimony is powerful. In the long run, it is a message for ministry.

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Notes

¹ David J. A. Clines, *Job 1–20*, Word Biblical Commentary 17 (Dallas: Word Books, 1989), xxvix.

² Archibald MacLeish, *J. B.* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958), 14.

³ Philip Yancey, *Disappointment With God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 163.

⁴ Frederick Buechner, quoted in Yancey, 188.

⁵ Pope, lxx.

⁶ James Gustafson, “A Response to the Book of Job,” in *The Voice From the Whirlwind: Interpreting the Book of Job*, ed. Perdue and Gilpin (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 174.

⁷ *Ibid.*, lxxvii.

⁸ “In Search of Divine Presence,” in *Urgent Advice and Probing Questions*, ed. James L. Crenshaw (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1995), 487.

⁹ “The Concept of God in OT Wisdom,” in *Urgent Advice and Probing Questions*, ed. James L. Crenshaw (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1995), 200.

¹⁰ Norman C. Habel, “In Defense of God the Sage,” *The Voice From the Whirlwind*, ed. Leo G. Perdue and W. Clark Gilpin (Nashville: Abingdon Press), 25.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 35.