

Job's Grief: Bargaining & Despair

Today, as we continue to review the Book of Job in light of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross' well-accepted theory of the five stages of grief, we will consider Job's depression or despair and the question of whether or not he actually goes through a stage of bargaining. Dr. Kübler-Ross was very careful in her book, On Death and Dying, to say that not everyone experiences all of her five stages or experiences them in the same order. Indeed, some people go back and forth between two or more of the stages for some time before finally reaching resolution. Although this sermon series to date has dealt with the stages of Job's grief in the classic order that Kübler-Ross proposed, in retrospect I'd probably switch things a bit as Job is certainly someone who does not follow the classic pattern, for reasons I will touch on later. You may have noticed that while last week's sermon drew primarily on chapters 9 and 19 for our look at anger, this week we circle back to chapter 3 to focus on Job's depression and then jump to chapter 29 to consider bargaining. Along the way, I want to consider how we react to the depression stage of grief, both in ourselves and others, how in some ways it is the "approved" form of grief, and also what we learn in these passages about the real goodness of Job. How is it that God was able to cite this whining, raging example of humanity as one who was blameless and upright?

Depending on where on the spectrum between shock and denial on one end and simple faith on the other that you place Job's short speeches in chapters one and two, the story of his actual grief process may begin at the end of chapter two when we read that his friends sat in silence with him for seven days and nights. This withdrawal and near-catatonia is a textbook feature of the depression stage of grief. When at last Job speaks, his depression, even despair, is clear. He curses both the day he was born and the night on which he was conceived, wishing, as we heard, for self-oblivion. It is one of the most heart-wrenching descriptions of the depression and self-loathing of grief in literature, right along with Hamlet's speech in Act One, scene two of Shakespeare's play: "O, that this too too solid flesh would melt,/Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!/Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd/His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! God!/How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable/Seem to me all the uses of this world!"

There is some irony in the language Job uses to describe his plight. "Why is light given to one who cannot see the way, whom God has fenced in?" he asks. Gerald Wilson points out that Job is echoing the words of the Adversary in chapter one but with a twist. While "ha-satan" complained that God had made it easy for Job to be righteous by putting "a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side," Job now feels fenced in with adversity. Job is in that place that I suspect so many of us have experienced in the midst of grief, when the feelings of loss and pain are so overwhelming that we can see nothing else. We feel shut in to a very small space where all that accompanies us are our troubles.

I can point to a couple of times in my own life when this was true for me. The most debilitating was during a period that I've often referred to as the worst year and a half of my life. In truth, it probably lasted rather longer than that but the contributing events all took place within about a year and a half. It began with the sudden death of my mother in May of 1978, just a month before I graduated from high school. Although I had known for years that her health was fragile, it was a traumatic event. I awoke around midnight that night to hear her crying out in pain and she was clearly in agony until the ambulance came for her, which was the last time I saw her alive. I remember putting on a very brave face – many people who knew me commented on how well I was handling the loss. Unfortunately, they didn't know what was going on inside me. I

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went ahead with my decision to attend college 800 miles away that fall; away from my family, my friends and my church home, which may not have been the wisest decision under the circumstances. In October, my uncle's family was stricken with an unknown but deadly malady. My aunt and my youngest cousin in that family were discovered dead on a Monday morning, my uncle and my other cousin gravely ill. Since my little sister had spent part of the weekend with them, there was concern for her as well, although in the event she escaped unscathed. I remember when I went home for Thanksgiving and my dad met me at the airport, he looked about fifteen years older than when he'd taken me to Houston in August. Christmas was a cheerless affair that year with three family members so recently deceased. My uncle and cousin put in an appearance at the family celebration but both had suffered neurological damage and were scarcely themselves. My cousin passed that February. Meanwhile, I had discovered that being a National Merit Scholar was no guarantee of success at a highly competitive university and I was struggling with academic failure for the first time in my life. By the time my high school sweetheart broke up with me the following Christmas, particularly painful since she had been such a comforting presence after my mother's death, I too was beginning to wonder if life was worth living.

Now, my troubles were nowhere near as profound as Job's and I don't want to make myself sound like some kind of martyr. But I tell you all this in order to say that the despair of Job's grief resonates with me deeply. I felt at the end of my rope by the spring of 1980. Thanks be to God, I was blessed in a way that Job was not, because I had some good, faithful friends who wisely didn't offer me the sorts of cold consolation that Job's friends offered him. I remain particularly grateful to my sophomore year roommate, a friend to this day, who was willing to drop the sort of macho posturing to which young men of that age and at that time and place were particularly prone and sit with me on the floor of our room and hold me while I wept. As Scott Hoeszee writes in his online comments on Job, "when you are faced with a suffering sister or brother, the best thing you may be able to do is acknowledge the pain, admit that you don't have an answer either, and then sit quietly on the ash heap to wait with your suffering friend for God to put in an appearance. That is sometimes the kindest and most compassionate thing anyone can offer." I was also blessed around that time with the friendship of a co-worker, which later turned into something quite different – she's put up with me now as friend and spouse for 30 years.

Now, remember, when Job sinks into despair at the end of chapter two, he has just declined his wife's suggestion to curse God and die. His own question in response, "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God and not receive the bad?" is still fresh on his lips. He is coming from a place of simple and untested faith in God as, indeed, I did also in my dreadful year and a half. In a terrible way, I think this makes Job's depression, as well as mine and that of any other person of faith who is in grief, more understandable. You see, until we are forced to deal with it in our own lives, it is very easy for us to believe in that "doctrine of retribution" which I mentioned last week: the idea that humankind receives punishment or blessing from the hand of God in correspondence to their wickedness or goodness. As long as we who believe in the goodness of God hold to this concept, the adversity we face in life must be explained by our failures. Instead of being angry at God, as Job was able to do once he abandoned this concept, we can only be angry with ourselves for acting in a way to bring down God's wrath. And this anger turned inward, as modern psychology has shown, is the root of depression.

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There are two lessons that I think we must take from the Book of Job here for our spiritual wellbeing. First, if our grief journey leads us from depression, anger turned inward, to anger with God, that is perfectly OK. God is big enough for our anger. I think Neil Simon was on to something when, in his play "God's Favorite," he has God speak to the Job-like Joe Benjamin after Joe has finally unleashed his anger on God. In a similar manner, as we'll see next week, the author of the Book of Job writes a powerful response from the Almighty after the protagonist has moved from depression to anger. Once we get mad, it seems, we can get somewhere. Then, like Jacob, we can wrestle with our God until we find our proper relationship. But in the community of faith, anger at God is too often seen as gauche, a breach of good manners, at the very least and as blasphemous at worst. Yet the Bible, in Job, in Psalms, in the prophets, clearly shows evidence of God's servants being truly angry with God without condemnation. On the other hand, to stay angry with ourselves for our crises when they are not of our own making will get us nowhere. Assuming the doctrine of retribution and placing blame on ourselves inappropriately is an injustice both to ourselves and to God. It actually reduces God to our servant and puts us in God's place. The doctrine of retribution says, in effect, "If I sin, even if I am unaware of it, then God must punish me. If I am good, then God must reward me." We attempt to hem in the freedom of God with rules of our own devising. To put ourselves on a level with or above God in this way, the Bible teaches, is to repeat the sin of the first humans, who ate of the tree of knowledge in order to be like God. The second great lesson from Job this morning is that this doctrine of retribution simply doesn't work. We are not God and the innocent do suffer.

At both the beginning and the end of this book, remember, God affirms God's pleasure with Job. He is "blameless and upright" and he speaks of God "what is right." Chapters 29 – 31, of which I read a very short portion earlier, are Job's impassioned defense of himself as a righteous man. He has fulfilled the righteousness of which God's prophets were to speak, been an adherent of what James, the brother of Jesus, called "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father... to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world." If we need an exemplar of an ancient and faithful man who, transported to today, would be a faithful donor to Bread for the World, here he is. In chapter 31, Job says, "If I have withheld anything that the poor desired, or have caused the eyes of the widow to fail, or have eaten my morsel alone, and the orphan has not eaten from it... if I have seen anyone perish for lack of clothing, or a poor person without covering... who was not warmed with the fleece of my sheep... then let my shoulder blade fall from my shoulder, and let my arm be broken from its socket." The protest of Job is real. God has held him before the Adversary as an example of what humankind can be and God later tells Job's friends that he and not they are the right ones. In my opinion, Job never enters into a bargaining phase of grief because he doesn't have to! He has already done all that he can to fulfill God's call upon him. Whatever theodicy, whatever theological solution to the problem of the presence of pain and evil in the world that we may eventually adopt, it cannot be the doctrine of retribution. The innocent do suffer. That means, if we love God, we must do so only for the love of God and not in expectation of reward. Our God is not a push-button morality machine, not programmed to our desires like the highly computerized theatrical equipment my friend and former colleague Tommy Thompson used to deride as "Push button; get cookie." Our God is a wild, unpredictable, untamed God, much like C.S. Lewis' Aslan, the great lion-king of Narnia.

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That same C.S. Lewis was once asked, "Why do the righteous suffer?" "Why not?" he replied. "They're the only ones who can take it." Lewis, of course, is famous in part for his careful but entirely readable treatise on the philosophy of suffering from 1940, The Problem of Pain, as well as his much different, very personal reflections on the same topic in 1961 after the death of his wife, published as A Grief Observed. In 1985, William Nicholson wrote a television drama called "Shadowlands" for the BBC about the brief marriage of Lewis and Joy Davidman. He later adapted his work for the stage and still later for a Hollywood movie starring Anthony Hopkins and Debra Winger. One of the proudest achievements of my theatrical career remains a production of the play that I directed for the A.D. Players in its Houston premiere in 1983. At the beginning of the play, the character of Lewis speaks intelligently but rather glibly about the presence of suffering in the world. "We're like blocks of stone, out of which the sculptor carves the forms of men. The blows of His chisel, which hurt us so much, are what make us perfect. The suffering in the world is not the failure of God's love for us; it is that love in action. For believe me, this world that seems to us so substantial is no more than the shadowlands. Real life has not begun yet," he says, rather airily. It's a pretty good theory and with a fine pedigree in Christian thought. But at the end of the play, when he has learned to open himself up to love and then lost that love to premature death, he finds that he must comfort Joy's young son in his grief as well as dealing with his own. After the two finally release their pent-up sorrow in tears, Jack is left alone to address the audience. His words are similar but the feeling behind them is very different. He sounds more like Job now than one of his know-it-all friends. "We are like blocks of stone, out of which the sculptor carves the forms of men. The blows of His chisel, which hurt us so much, are what make us perfect. No shadows here. Only darkness, and silence, and the pain that cries like a child." Is it true? Does pain help to make us perfect? Was the real C.S. Lewis right when he wrote, as quoted in Nicholson's play, "pain is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world"?

My answer to you this morning is yes, and no. We all know those people whose only legacy of pain is bitterness, who allow disappointment or suffering to turn them inward, unwilling or perhaps afraid to reach out to others, to risk being hurt again for the sake of something good. But as I consider the period in my own life which I related to you this morning, I know that I emerged from that experience with the hope that my journey through grief had made me more compassionate, better able to empathize with the griefs and losses of others, prepared in a new way to sit in the silence of the ash heap with a friend who needed only my presence and not my philosophy. I would like to be able to stand here this morning and tell you that grief always makes us better people; that when we traverse the path of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, we arrive at a new and more Godly state. But I cannot deny the witness of Job, who even before his tragedy was a champion of the downtrodden and of the immigrant, one who not only fed the hungry and clothed the naked and cared for the lame and the blind but who "broke the fangs of the unrighteous, and made them drop their prey from their teeth" and still was acclaimed by one and all in his city. Could a man described by God Godself as "blameless" really need the painful blows of the sculptor's chisel?

Next week, we'll take Job to the final step of grief, acceptance, and consider just what it was that God said to him out of the whirlwind to get him there. But I want to leave you this morning with one more story of grief and how faith brought something beautiful out of tragedy. It's a story I think I've shared with you before and that some of you, no doubt, have known already. Horatio

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Spafford was a successful lawyer in Chicago when, on October 8, 1871, the Great Chicago Fire swept through the city. Spafford had invested heavily in the city's real estate and the fire destroyed almost everything he owned. As he struggled to regain financial security, he decided two years later that his family deserved a vacation. He booked passage for his wife and four daughters to England on the steamship *Ville du Havre*, promising to join them soon in London. But as he was preparing for his own departure, Spafford received a tragically brief telegram from his wife, "Saved alone." The *Ville du Havre* had been struck mid-voyage by another vessel. All four of his daughters, along with 220 others, were drowned. As he traveled to meet his wife in England, Spafford's ship sailed the same route as the ill-fated *Ville du Havre*. Near the position where his girls had been lost, he wrote a poem beginning, "When peace, like a river, attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll; whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say, it is well, it is well with my soul." Horatio Spafford and his wife had three more children, one a son who died in infancy, and established the American Colony in Jerusalem, a center for philanthropic work. Through his song and later work, countless people have been blessed. Out of his grief, Horatio Spafford's faith allowed him to create something good. May our faith, like Spafford's and like Job's, help us to break out from the tightly constricting fence of depression and lead us to show our love for God by serving God's people and God's Creation, not out of hope of reward but out of love. Amen.