

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOB (Job 19:23-27a)

Rev. Todd Speidell, PhD

Redeemer Asheville, Asheville, NC

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todd_speidell@tftorrance.org

tspeidell@montreat.edu

The Gospel according to Job: "For I know that my Redeemer lives"¹ (19:25a), Job confesses and proclaims.

He *knows* that his Redeemer lives! But how did Job come to this knowledge, this personal confession of faith? And if you don't think that deep and genuine faith can come to us via the path of suffering, then I'd like to introduce you to my good friend Job.

Before we hear Job's profession, however, we must first learn how he got to that point. When we read the beginning of the very same chapter, we learn and hear of Job's intense anger toward his friends, which soon becomes Job's accusation against God himself. Job speaks first to his friends before he targets God when he says:

How long will you torment me, and break me in pieces with words? These ten times you have cast reproach upon me; are you not ashamed to wrong me? And even if it is true that I have erred, my error remains with myself. If indeed you magnify yourselves against me, and make my humiliation an argument against me, know then that God has put me in the wrong, and closed his net about me (19:2-6).

Now how is it possible that Job would say that God has wronged him (19:6) while at the same time and only shortly later that he knows his redeemer lives (19:25a)? And why his anger toward his friends?

1 All translations are from John C. L. Gibson's *Job* (Phila.: Westminster, 1985), unless otherwise noted.



The friends first appear in the book's prologue, which is a traditional folk tale of piety and yet of tragedy. As readers we know that Job, as the text says, "was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil" (1:1b). As the story continues, God permits Satan to put Job to the test, including the death of Job's animals, servants, and children (and then later inflicting Job with painful sores all over his body as a second test). Job mourns his loss and grief: he "rent his robe, and shaved his head" (1:20a). But he then "fell upon the ground, and worshipped," exclaiming:

Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away;

May the name of the Lord be praised (1:20b-21).

But Job's wife is not as pious and patient! She says to him: "Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die" (2:9). Her one line in the whole book! I considered "*Curse God and Die!*" as a sermon title, but decided it wasn't too edifying. But I also considered that she, perhaps, anticipates the main theme of the book, which is about *God*, not about Job.

Job's wife has a brief but poignant presence in the book. She speaks as a mother who just lost her children. She herself is crying out in the pain and agony of the deepest loss imaginable. In Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, one of the brothers, Ivan, comments on the tragedy of the loss of children: "I made up my mind long ago not to understand. If I try to understand anything, I will be false to the facts and I have determined to stick to the facts."²

While I was talking with a mom who had lost two of her children, she said to me: "There is nothing worse in life than to have your children die before you do. *I can no longer pray.*" That's a very heartfelt response from a mom experiencing such deep grief and tragic loss. She could no longer accept an all-controlling God that contradicted her own personal experience. So she could only cry out in protest, just as Job's wife cried out in her grief and encouraged her husband to curse God.

Both moms shared the traditional theology of the prologue, which Job summarized while telling his wife, "You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil? In all this Job did not sin with his lips" (2:10).

Now if you skip the next nearly 40 chapters of Job, you'll see in the epilogue (42:10ff.) that Job was rewarded for his faith with restored fortunes, new animals, and even new children! So the prologue and epilogue of Job form a traditional, intact, pious folk tale: God gives and God takes; may his name be praised.

2 Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (NY: Signet, 1957), 224.

But that is **NOT** the whole, or even the main, story of Job.

Job's friends: Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar — perhaps name choices for those of you with growing families! — appear to comfort him, cry with him, and express their sympathy for their friend in seven days of silence, "and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great" (2:13b). These were Job's friends at their best: They kept their mouths shut. Sometimes that's the best wisdom: To say *nothing* when tragedy should *not* be explained but only mourned. Job's friends were at their best when they sat and stayed with him in the deepest sympathy possible: silence in face of the suffering of a loved one.

At this point in the story, the narrative flow of Job suddenly shifts to a massive dialogue and debate between Job and his friends, which begins in ch. 3. Everything now changes when Job cries out to God, cursing the day of his birth (3:1-19). He complains to *God Almighty* for his *unjustified suffering*. He questions, "Why is light given to a man whose way is hid, whom God has hedged in?" (3:23). This is *not* the Job of the previous chapter who thanked God for what is good *and* for what is awful. His personal experience contradicts his traditional theology, and so he can no longer believe what he used to believe.

So in Job we are dealing with his main struggle in life: What does he do when his beliefs contradict his experience?

And we too need to ask ourselves: What do we do if we feel the same contradiction in life?

For the next 20 chapters, Job's friends and counselors blame Job for his troubles and tell him to *repent* of his sins! They insist upon the traditional doctrine of retribution, which Eliphaz summarizes:

Think now, who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright ever cut off? As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same (4:7-8).

They have a short and simple statement for their friend Job: You reap what you sow. Their vocal exhortations to him are concealed condemnations. *Exhortations and condemnations!*

What is excruciatingly painful for Job and his wife is that they *agree* with the traditional theology of Job's friends. This is precisely why Job experiences an anguish and an anger that he expresses to his friends but then focuses on God Almighty. "How long will you torment me and crush me with words?," he complains to his friends (19:2). But if what the friends say is true — which again is what Job and his wife believe, or at least used to believe — "then know that God has put me in the wrong, and closed his net about me" (19:6), Job complains.

Job's agonies are too real to indulge academic debate with his friends regarding *why* God supposedly permits or sanctions terrible evil and unjust suffering. Instead he focuses on *who* God is, but midway through the book, he still feels that God has failed him and tortured him. God is still almighty, Job believes, but he is not good. Job's theology has led him to disappointment. Praising God both for good and for evil no longer works. And yes: Theology can be dangerous!

And so from today's alternate lectionary reading:

- 23 Oh that my words were written!
Oh that they were inscribed in a book!
- 24 Oh that with an iron pen and lead
they were graven in the rock forever!

Job is *not* content writing his complaint against God on the papyrus of a scroll. *No, for the sake of posterity, he wants to engrave his words with an iron tool on solid rock!* He wishes that his demand for vindication would be "engraved in the rock forever!" (19:24b). Job *knows* he is innocent (as God himself had declared in ch. 1: "there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil" [1:8b]). So Job takes God to task.

We cannot understand today's reading if we don't see earlier in ch. 19 that Job shifts his complaint against his friends to accusing *God himself* (19:1-6), which is a similar shift from the popular piety of the prologue, which focused on a test of Job's faith, to the protest poetry of the dialogue — the great bulk of the book — which focused on God's justice.

Unlike the syrupy and self-centered spirituality of our own culture — maybe even here in Asheville! — the book of Job is a magnificent masterpiece of protest poetry. Tennyson called it "the greatest poem of ancient and modern times." The book of Job is **NOT** about *our* spirituality — like here in Asheville where "spiritual but not religious" *is* the dominant "religion" of the town! The "religion" of Asheville, as is prevalent in larger American culture, is disorganized and do-it-yourself religion.

Job is a deeply and personally probing book about **GOD**. It's not about us, our faith, our beliefs, or our spirituality. The book of Job is the gospel of grace in the very center of the Hebrew Scriptures, which points us and lifts us beyond ourselves to encounter God, even in the midst of the worst suffering imaginable.

The Elephant Man is a movie that depicts the grotesque deformity of John Merrick and the cruel inhumanity of those around him — kind of like Job's friends. A doctor rescues him from a circus, where he was on display, but the doctor too treats John Merrick as a medical abnormality for investigation. Eventually, however, the doctor and a nurse start treating him as a human being. John

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Merrick never had a physical healing, but the human kindness, support, and affirmation of others help create a greater miracle than physical healing. When John Merrick lies down to sleep for the last time, he dies in peace — even without physical healing. In the morning, the sun rises and shines through a church model that John Merrick had just finished building, like the light and love of God.

John Merrick in real life said of his model of a church (which was of St. Phillip's in London): "It is not stone and steel and glass; it is an imitation of grace flying up and up from the mud."

Our friend Job also cries out for the *real and living God of grace*. How is it possible that Job goes from blaming God for his problems to confessing his hope in God? Just verses later, in a sudden shift in this book of paradox, irony, and mystery, Job now confesses:

- 25 For I know that my Redeemer lives,
and at last he will stand upon the earth;
26 and after my skin has been thus destroyed,
then from my flesh I shall see God,
27a whom I shall see on my side,
and my eyes shall behold, and not another."

Some commentators³ consider the "Redeemer" of v. 25 as someone different from the "God" of vv. 26-7. They reason that it's not "logical" to appeal to God against God! These commentators (like Job's friends!) are dismissing the irrational element of Job — the paradox, irony, and mystery of Job — because it's "illogical"?

The strange logic and admittedly contradictory nature of Job's faith is common

3 Norman C. Habel's *The Book of Job* comments: for the redeemer to "be one and the same person as his cruel opponent seems quite illogical, inconsistent, and, from Job's perspective, intolerable"; furthermore, "it would mean a complete reversal in the pattern of Job's thought to date . . ." (Phila.: Westminster, 1985), 305f. Marvin H. Pope's *Job* similarly suggests that applying the term redeemer "to God in this context is also questionable since elsewhere in Job's complaint it is God himself who is Job's adversary rather than defender" (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), 134. For a refutation of the view that Job's tortured state of mind should be held to a standard of logic, see John C. L. Gibson, *Job* (Phila. Westminster, 1985), 152; Robert Gordis, *The Book of God and Man: A Study of Job* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1965), 87f.; and H. H. Rowley, *The Book of Job* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 138. Arthur S. Peake's *The Problem of Suffering in the Old Testament* speaks in the spirit of Job, acknowledging the alleged or apparent irrationality of his thought: "Here the poet advances to one of his deepest thoughts. Not only does Job appeal from man to God, but he appeals from God to God" (London: Epworth, 1904), 83.

in the protest literature of the Old Testament: Just consider the many psalms of lament that begin with protest and end in praise. Ps. 22, for example, begins with "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" (NKJV). And yet within just a few verses, David acknowledges that God has delivered his ancestors: "They cried to You, and were delivered; They trusted in You, and were not ashamed" (22:5). Yes, Job's feelings fluctuate too as he questions God and cries out for his help at the same time!

David's cry in Ps. 22 — "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me" — is the Old Testament verse which Jesus himself cried out from the cross, *for us and on our behalf*. Some of the worst so-called evangelical theology interprets this god-forsaken cry to mean that the Father turned his back on Jesus — in his Son's moment of need when the salvation of the world was at stake! ***It's just the opposite: God himself took up our cry, David's cry, and Job's cry.***

Job had exclaimed back in ch. 16:

Even now, behold, my witness is in heaven, and he that vouches for me is on high. My friends scorn me; my eyes pour out tears to God, that he would maintain the right of a man with God, like that of a man with his neighbour (19-21).

The Redeemer in our text today is none other than God on high! The Hebrew word (*go-el*) for Redeemer refers to the duties and obligations of family members to protect and defend the rights of their loved ones in trouble, of relatives who are weak and in need of one who would "redeem" them from misfortune or death. For Job, nothing less than God as his Advocate will do or help.

Even while staring into the abyss, Job confesses that his Redeemer lives and will stand by his side and on his behalf! *He wants his day in court with God, but he wants God himself to descend from Heaven on High and stand next to Job by his side and upon the Earth.*

Like his friends, Job wants to *know*: Why does God permit suffering? Job and his friends both accept the validity of this question, even though they draw opposite conclusions. But when God appears — with questions of his own — Job confesses the limits of what he can know. In the end, Job quotes God, "Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?" (42:3a).

Then Job replies, "Therefore I have uttered *what I did not understand*, things too wonderful for me to know, which I did not know" (42:3b). Job now knows who God is: He is his Redeemer, Advocate, and Defender. He now adores, confesses, and worships God in his mystery and transcendence, even though he now gets that he doesn't understand life in all of its complications. Job confesses that we humans cannot understand the mysteries of the universe and the tensions,

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ambiguities, and perplexities of human life.

And then Job finally confesses, "I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees thee" (42:5). Despite all of his suffering — nay, in the very midst of his terrible circumstances — his prayer and hope are now fulfilled before the very presence of God.

The book of Job, **the Gospel according to Job**, concludes with what Job had cried out for in today's lectionary reading, which I will read one last time:

But in my heart I know that *my vindicator lives*
and that he will rise last to speak in court;
and I shall discern my witness *standing at my side*
and see my defending counsel, even **God himself**,
whom I shall see with *my own eyes*, I myself and no other

(19:25-7a NEB; emphasis added).

This is the Gospel according to Job.