

The Burdens (and Blessings) of Job

Pastor Joe Greemore, Brewster Baptist Church, November 7, 2021

Today is the first book in our next series of five books. These books of poetry and wisdom are at the heart of the Hebrew Bible with the 17 books of History and Law coming before and the 17 Major and Minor Prophets following, and even though we've only reached the 18th book in our journey through the 66 books of the Bible week by week, in some ways we have reached a midpoint in terms of volume. For instance, Psalms, next week's book, a source of many beloved songs and scriptures, is in the middle of the entire Christian Bible, with Psalm 118 being in the very center, bookended by both the shortest and longest chapters in the Bible. Some scholars estimate Job to be the oldest written portion of our of Bible literature with an estimated date of 1900 BC, some 500 years before the Pentateuch was written. Yet it has never lost its contemporary application or connectivity.

Theologian and Biblical Historian Walter Brueggemann gives us this tantalizing introduction to Job's story. "The book of Job in its three parts of *narrative-poetry-narrative* is a daring, majestic fugue that renders theological trouble and submissiveness in all of its immense complexity. The whole of the drama is to be fully appreciated in its inexhaustible artistry, and not interpreted so that it is made to conform to any of our ready-made theological packages." (An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination, 2003)

What would you do if you heard this news headline:

Fortune 500 mogul and billionaire philanthropist, Job Eastland, whose exploits of generosity have become legendary in a world huddled around Wall Street, lost everything in a day.

Eastland had just given a \$10 million donation to Habitat for Humanity, apologized that it could not be more this year due to an uncertain economy, and followed up that gift with a charitable \$50 million toward the Make-a-Wish Foundation. Days later, Job's ten children, who were together on a medical missions flight over Ecuador on their way back to the Amazon Rainforest, were lost when their plane tragically crashed with none surviving. Job's financial holdings were wiped out in a sudden, dramatic series of events beyond his control, and his business, which consisted of a workforce of 3,000, have all been put on indefinite, unpaid leave while at the same time suffering 100% COVID exposure.

Picture your response; how might you react to this news?

- Would you feel pity for Job, who went from riches to relatively nothing virtually overnight?
- Overcome with empathy, would you feel deep regret and remorse at his sudden change of fortune? Would you wonder who now stood to receive the inheritance, if indeed there was any, the *legacy* of a wealthy, generous force for good?
- Or perhaps somewhere in your heart, would you feel that the weights had been balanced in your favor, that the universe had somehow made restitution and the world had tilted back toward equilibrium?
- Or, beyond questions of right or wrong, would you stop and ask, why did all these terrible things happen to such a good, undeserving person?

The news story I shared was a metaphor for the introduction to Job's story in the Hebrew Bible. If you asked that last question, you wouldn't be alone. For millennia, the question, "If God is good, why do bad things still happen?" has perennially piqued people of faith who have probed for answers, looking for logic, reason, or rhyme to suffering. Philosophers and theologians have wrestled with such recurring tragedies, wondering why difficult things happen to good people. They have even given the topic a name, "theodicy," the problem of evil.

In our series of Wisdom and Literature books, entitled "How Do I Live Wisely?" the predominant theme is that God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked. The very first book however, Job, through didactic disputation and Job's own lived experience, challenges this notion. Job is a prime example of how *very difficult things sometimes happen to very good people*. While 'theodicy' may help us clearly articulate and ask the question, it may be far more elusive to find a meaningful answer. The language of praise and lament, as we will see in Psalms and later books, are two scriptural reactions to hardships.

In my experience, everyone is caught up at some point in life's difficulties, whether as a result of their own decisions or simple circumstance. For some, when they make the decision to follow Jesus, they imagine life to become trouble free. But troubles are inevitable. Job is no exception. Despite his deep faith and wise living, his righteous nature doesn't save him from life's trials; rather, in this case, it seems his good reputation is the very reason these difficult things happen.

Still, the big question remains: *why?*

- Why did Job have to go through all those trials?
- What was the point? Did they make his faith stronger?

- If that was the point, couldn't it have been accomplished another way?

So many more questions stem from that central question of 'why'? What was God up to in the midst of this book? In fact, after forty chapters of conversations with his companions, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, along with a surprise interruption by Elihu, Job himself comes around to this question. And God has an answer: *more questions!* Our Men's Monday Morning Bible Study group wrestled through those questions as they studied Job last year.

Do you ever find that to be the case in life? You're looking to ease the ambiguity, wonder what God is up to, add just a smidgeon of clarity, something to hold on to, some real estate to claim as your own, and instead all you get is an invitation to "keep searching, keep trying, dig deeper"?

Rather than seek with the multitudes to answer why evil exists in this world, let's take a different approach. Let's ask what Job learned from his difficulties, and what we can learn from him.

Another wisdom literature book, Proverbs, shares "A good name is to be chosen over great wealth; favor is better than silver and gold" (Prov. 22:1, Christian Standard Bible).

When the story began, Job had both: a good name, and great riches. He was the wealthiest, most prosperous righteous person in the land! However, shortly after he lost his riches and his body was afflicted, even his good name came into question under the scrutinizing gaze of trusted peers.

Will Rogers once said, "You got to sorter give and take in this old world. We can get mighty rich, but if we haven't got any friends, we will find we are poorer than anybody."

*Part of Job's problem **was** his friends who presumed and spoke out against the guilt they perceived in Job.*

Job would *have to have had* patience when surround for days on end by friends who were convinced from the outset he was guilty until proven innocent. Had he earned that good name and those riches for nothing, they may have wondered. No doubt he had engaged in some illicit, underhanded dealings that blessed Job with such extravagant wealth.

They knew he must have done something to deserve all this pain and suffering, that divine punishment was warranted for his wayward ways, that some unconfessed sin had brought about this great calamity.

In the New Testament letter of James, we learn about one of the lasting attributes of Job: patience.

James 5:10-11 reads, “¹⁰ Brothers and sisters, as an **example of patience in the face of suffering**, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. ¹¹ As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have **seen what the Lord finally brought about**. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.” (Emphasis added)

More about what the Lord finally brought about in a moment. Patience is a high price to pay for all Job had to endure: the loss of children, personal property, and the trust of those closest to him in life, including his wife and friends. Yet patience was not the outcome of Job's trials; it was the means by which he weathered those storms and how he managed to survive such unbearably difficult circumstances. Job's patience and perseverance were both a *result of* his burdens and a *means to* his blessing.

Job knew all the calamities that befell him were well beyond his control. He saw how powerless he was in the face of overwhelming, supernatural forces. Yet it was his unwavering trust in God's goodness that was his anchor in the end. What were Job's burdens and blessings? Here are three to consider: his faith, his fortune, and his friends.

Job's faith in a system, an ethical framework, that rewards people for doing good and punishes them for doing wrong is a burden, although it was the established, traditional theology of Moses, Deuteronomy, and Sinai, the concept of retribution, or blessings and curses, a way of understanding God and the world that would have been well known to God's people. It leaves little room for grace and mercy. Job's unwavering faith in God is a blessing that carries him through impossible difficulties and opposition. Job's enormous fortune is an equally enormous burden precisely at the point at which he loses it all. His fortune becomes a blessing when it is restored and multiplied. Job's friends, meant to be of comfort, become a burden when they become convinced of his guilt. Job has the opportunity to extend a blessing to them and to be blessed himself after he prays for them. When you think of it, through all the heavy circumstances Job endured, it must have been a burden to persevere and keep his patience. But the very patience and perseverance that were born in adversity and cultivated by godly character and values were an immense blessing.

The burdens and blessings of Job are a telling reminder to us all of the value of persistence and would have benefited but briefly without the lasting lessons of his patience and perseverance.

How deep is your faith? Would you say you have the patience of Job? For heaven's sake, don't pray for it, or you may get what you asked for! Instead, I encourage you to fully lean into the abundant, unending love of God.

Martha read for us words from the Prologue and the Epilogue of Job. In the Prologue, we get a glimpse of the immensity of what Job is facing. We have the cause. The rippling effects are felt all throughout the biblical narrative. Instead of waving a white flag of surrender, Job put on the clothes of praise. He insisted on honoring God, not giving up on his faith, and clung to his own innocence for dear life.

It isn't until the Epilogue that this pays off for Job.

Let's listen together to the end of the story from Job 42:10-17 (NIV):

¹⁰ After Job had prayed for his friends, the Lord restored his fortunes and gave him twice as much as he had before. ¹¹ All his brothers and sisters and everyone who had known him before came and ate with him in his house. They comforted and consoled him over all the trouble the Lord had brought on him, and each one gave him a piece of silver and a gold ring.

¹² The Lord blessed the latter part of Job's life more than the former part. He had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen and a thousand donkeys. ¹³ And he also had seven sons and three daughters. ¹⁴ The first daughter he named Jemimah, the second Keziah and the third Keren-Happuch. ¹⁵ Nowhere in all the land were there found women as beautiful as Job's daughters, and their father granted them an inheritance along with their brothers.

¹⁶ After this, Job lived a hundred and forty years; he saw his children and their children to the fourth generation. ¹⁷ And so Job died, an old man and full of years.”

So as for the inheritance, not only did Job’s sons stand to receive legacy gifts, but his daughters as well. In an Ancient Near Eastern Culture where this was far from commonplace, Job’s descendants benefited both from his presence during life and the love that continued after his death.

It had begun to seem that only the Almighty would come to Job’s defense. After all the trials, the hardships, the loss, God asked Job to perform the herculean task of praying for those very friends who had been such bitter companions, those who, having been quick to come to his comfort, turned and became his chief critics.

While scholars may not be able to tell us when the book was written, just who Job was or where he lived, or why difficult things happen in our lives, perhaps **one** of the greatest lessons we can learn is that of perseverance, that if we don’t give up, blessings will come. This would have been an invaluable reminder for the community of Israel during a time of exile, asking the question of what had they done as God’s chosen people to deserve all this difficulty, pain, and suffering.

Jesus shares this concept in the introduction to the sermon on the mount, a group of teachings some of the adults are studying on Sunday mornings, in the section we know as, “The Beatitudes.” Blessed, or happy, are those who mourn, or hunger and thirst, or are meek, or are merciful, or who make peace, or are pure in heart, or are persecuted, because their end shall be greater than what they now experience. In the realm of philosophy, such an outlook would be called teleology,

with the Greek word 'telos' meaning an end, a purpose, or an outcome. Perhaps you are familiar with the phrase, "the end justifies the means."

It would appear that this is the case for Job, that because he was blessed in the end, because his friends were forgiven, and because his family was restored, all the difficulty and despair he experienced were somehow justified. I want to posit another view, that in the end, his strength, wisdom, and godly character *redeemed* all that sadness and loss. Job never forgot the pain of losing his ten children, even when he looked at his new family growing and having their own families.

Have you ever known anyone who was incredibly kind and loving, even when life dealt them a difficult hand? Hard circumstances can make a person incredibly bitter or build our character toward sainthood; they seldom leave us the same.

One of the blessings of Job is that we can still, today, learn from his perseverance and apply this mindset to our own lives.

Friends, I want to encourage us to take heart in the midst of difficulties. It would be hard to imagine a more tragic situation than the one Job faced, yet I know we all have our own hardships that are impossible to bear. So we are invited to leave them at the feet of Jesus, to have them transformed from obstacles into open doors, from shackles into a framework for blessing. Job had many burdens that were too much for him to bear. He looked to the Lord, who sustained him and in the end poured out blessings. And even though things were never the same for him, perhaps he gained a glimpse of heaven, of how things would someday be.

It can be hard for me to make sense of the difficulties I face in life. Sometimes I ask myself, "What did I do wrong to deserve this?" What if instead of focusing on

the difficulties I face, I look to the savior who sustains me in the midst of them? Like Peter stepping out onto the waves, what if I fix my eyes on Jesus instead of the storms all around me?

We can also learn much from Job about Jesus. Job is like Jesus in that in both cases, the innocent stands accused. Job's flesh was tormented; Jesus was beaten and scourged. Job interceded for his children, praying for them during their feasts and seeking to offer atonement in case they sinned. Jesus came on a mission to bring God's wayward children back into direct relationship with God, and while Job experienced the loss of all he held dear, for Jesus it was more. He gave up not only his health and possessions, but his very life.

It is by his wounds that we are healed and because of his love that our brokenness is ultimately redeemed. Thanks be to God for a Savior who loves us so and transforms all our burdens through his living sacrifice in exchange for blessings.

As Gustavo Gutierrez noted, "The world of retribution – and not of temporal retribution only – is not where God dwells; at most God visits it. The Lord is not prisoner of the "give to me and I will give to you" mentality. Nothing, no human work however valuable, merits grace, for if it did, grace would cease to be grace. This is the heart of the message of the book of Job." (Gustavo Gutierrez, 1987; Brueggemann, *Ibid.*) God's transforming grace is immeasurable, and it is available today. Let us pray.

Prayer: Loving God, thank you for inviting us to lay down our burdens at the cross. You took the sins of humanity on yourself and became a curse so that we might experience your blessing and know the blessing of praising your name. O Lord,

like Job, we do not always fully understand your ways. Sometimes you answer us out of the whirlwind of life, and we are caught up in the gyrations of circumstance.

So this morning, we want to be still and hear from you. We want to know what you are saying and what you want to share with us. Help us to be such friends as to listen and encourage others, to believe the best about them, and **bring** about a healing in our lives of all things lost and broken. Mend our heart, grant comfort and healing, and help us to mend any ways that are out of sync with your pattern and your plan. We give you thanks for never giving up on us. Grant us strength in the storm, perseverance in the pain, mercy in the maelstrom. We pray and give you thanks through Jesus' name. Amen.

One-Act Presentation: "Lay It Down at the Cross" Written, Produced, and Performed by David Hill

Cast thy burden upon the LORD, and he shall sustain thee: he shall never suffer the righteous to be moved. -Psalm 55:22

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. -Matthew 11:28-30