

THE BOOK OF JOB

6. Job is Restored

Job 42:1-17

PENTECOST 11

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Today we arrive at Chapter Forty-Two and the conclusion of the Book of Job.

For those who have made it through this entire six-sermon series, and those who are probably glad it's almost over, you may greet the announcement of its close with two related responses:

Thank God, and now we can move on, and
What does this book's message mean for us today?

If anyone is relieved about the arrival of this book's end, it is the person whose name forms its title — Job.

Remember at the outset, I said that Job was essentially two books in one.

The Fable appears in prose form in Chapters One and Two and at the end in Chapter Forty-two.

The Poem occupies the intervening thirty-nine chapters.

Job One and Two serve as a prologue for the book.

The first chapter introduces Job as a man of exemplary character (1:1) described by Yahweh as blameless, righteous, and God-fearing.

The rest of the book is intended to be read with this introduction in mind.

The Fable tells us that one day, Satan appeared before God to report on the doings of God's earthly subjects.

God says to Satan, also known as 'the Adversary,'

"Have you noticed my servant Job?"

"There is none like him on earth blameless and upright" (1:8)

Satan replies that of course he is good.

God has made it worth his while, rewarding him richly for his piety.

God insists that Job would be just as faithful even if all those blessings

were taken away from him.

God and Satan enter into a wager to test whether this is indeed the case.

In rapid succession, four servants come to Job, each with more devastating news.

In just a few moments, Job is reduced from riches to rags, from delight to disaster, from celebration to sorrow.

Job knows nothing of the conversation that took place between Yahweh and Satan.

All he can see is the tragic devastation of his livelihood and his family.

If the Adversary is correct, then Job's faith in God will soon collapse like a tent.

Or, if Job's blameless behavior is truly rooted in his heart, then his faith in Yahweh will survive amid the rubble of his experiences.

In the Second Chapter, God now turns to Satan and says

Have you noticed that Job has not been shaken in his faith despite what you persuaded Me to do to him?

Doesn't that prove that he is a person of total integrity?

Satan counters:

It doesn't prove a thing.

You've only taken his property, which can be replaced.

Touch him personally and see how quickly he will turn against You.

So God afflicts Job with a disease covering his entire body, causing him constant pain.

Job's wife urges him to curse God and be struck dead for it so that he could be put out of his misery, but he rebukes her.

Three friends come to console Job in his bereavement, but before they can say anything, the narrative changes from prose to poetry.

In Chapter Forty-two, beginning with verse seven, we come to the conclusion — the happy ending of the Fable.

Those who are attending the six-week Bible study on the Book of Job, the Bible's Most Challenging Book, will soon discover that today's text forms what scholars call the epilogue.

In this brief closing section, Yahweh brings resolution to Job's situation.

Yahweh affirms Job's innocence against the charges of his friends,

Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, and, furthermore, instructs the friends

to ask Job to pray for them.
Then Yahweh restores Job's family and fortune.

The picture which appears on your bulletin cover is a drawing by the famed spiritual artist William Blake, who presented it to be the first illustration for the Book of Job, published in 1825.

As you can see, it features Job and his wife, sitting with their seven sons and their three daughters before them.

One could suggest this painting portrays Job's restored family because of the prominent positions the three daughters occupy.

With the restoration of Job's family and fortune, the daughters are named, while the sons are not.

The daughters names reflect their exceptional beauty.

Jemimah means "dove."

Keziah refers to "cinnamon."

Keren-Happuch speaks of a bottle that holds inky black coloring used for eye shadow.

Also in the epilogue, Yahweh assesses each of the major characters, except for the youthful Elihu.

What Yahweh says about them is important for the interpretation of the Book.

Job's three friends have tried to protect Yahweh by invoking the retribution principle, which, simply stated, implies that the righteous are blessed, while the wicked are cursed.

According to the application of this principle, Job must have sinned, for now he is cursed.

However, by extrapolating the retribution principle into an indictment of Job, his three friends have reduced Yahweh into a predictable Deity who is confined by a fixed formula.

It may seem startling to hear Yahweh imply that Job has spoken the truth, in contrast to what his friends have wrongly stated.

Numerous times in his speeches throughout the poetic book, Job asked hard questions about God's sense of justice and fairness.

He often complained how he had been mistreated by God.

How Job addressed God could be compared with the laments in the Psalms, in which the psalmists, in their pain, frequently express their doubts, fears, and questions to the Lord.

As humans, we assess others by what we hear them say and see what they do.

However, the Lord knows completely what is in the hearts of people. On that basis, God has judged Job.

Job's restored blessings are not contingent upon Job's confession of his own sins, contrary to what Bildad had predicted.

They are granted by Yahweh after Job obediently intercedes for his friends. After their harsh words and unfair judgments to him, Job overcomes their evil with good.

In this, Job is not motivated by self-interest, as the Adversary has wrongly charged.

Yahweh has restored the vertical relationship between Himself and Job, and has healed as well the horizontal relationships between Job and the people who were once close to him.

Even though his time of crisis is over, Job still has to deal with the losses he has incurred, especially his children.

His solitude and pain are replaced by community and rejoicing, as Job receives belated consolation and encouragement.

So what benefit can we Christians derive from this Old Testament Book of Job?

Last Thursday, I introduced those present at my weekly Bible study to Archibald MacLeish's play, **J.B.** the Job story in modern dress.

In MacLeish's play, Job is the hero, forgiving God's unfairness and pledging more allegiance to God than God's actions toward him deserve.

For many, MacLeish's **J.B.** was less than satisfying.

MacLeish would later answer his critics.

A practicing Christian, MacLeish once gave a sermon in his church in Farmington, Connecticut, explaining what he was trying to say about God, man, and suffering in his play.

He defined the question this way:

“How can we believe in our lives unless we can believe in God, and how can we believe in God unless we can believe in the justice of God, and how can we believe in the justice of God in a world in which the innocent perish in rash, meaningless massacres, and brutal and dishonest men foul all the lovely things?”

MacLeish's answer:

God needed Job's suffering.

God needed to know that Job would love Him and be thankful and faithful to Him not only when things went well, but also when things went horribly badly.

In the key passage of his sermon, MacLeish said:

“Man depends on God for all things;

God depends on Man for one.

Without Man's Love, God does not exist as God, only as Creator,

And love is the one thing that no one, not even God, can command.”

Beloved people of God,

reading MacLeish's sermon, I understood for the first time since reading that play over a half century ago, the closing lines of the play.

J.B.'s wife, who left him when he could not condemn God for the deaths of their children, returns and says to him:

“You wanted justice, and there was none, only love.”

She is saying, the answer to your question will not be an explanation making sense of what happened to us, because it doesn't make sense.

Instead, it will be a response, a stubborn willingness to go on living in a world where children die and cities are bombed, a world where we go on living, God help us, because it is the only world we have.

Her message calls to mind an important teaching I learned much later on in life, when I read Viktor Frankl's **Man's Search for Meaning**.

Frankl said basically that we cannot control what the world does to us, but we can always control how we choose to respond to what the world does to us.

AMEN