

Job and God

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Heresy

I want to warn you in advance that what I have to say is heresy. It is biblical, but it is heresy—which by definition is not falsehood but a one-sided half-truth.

Consider the book of Job. Here is a story that does not fit in the main stream of biblical history: the story of a human individual and of God without a single reference to the covenant community. No remembrance of God's saving work among his people in the past. No hope for the coming of a promised Messiah to redeem his people and bring a new heaven and a new earth. No history of salvation at all. On the contrary, the story of an isolated believer who does not act like believers in the Bible are supposed to act. The story of an isolated God who does not act like the God of the Bible is supposed to act. Heresy.

Yet Job is part of the canon, the inspired Word of God. What it has to tell us about God and the human situation is far less than what the rest of the Bible has to tell us, but it is a part of the whole. And whoever will not hear this heretical part will not be able to hear the rest either.

So let us risk the heresy and take a closer look at Job and God.

The Story

Job was a good man. We are told that he obeyed the commandments of God and loved his word (23:11ff.). He helped the poor and helpless and defended the cause of the oppressed against their oppressors (21:12ff.). He was a law abiding, God-fearing, generous, compassionate, just man. And he was what he should have been by the standards of the ancient Near East and by the standards of modern American piety—successful, rich, happy, a respected leader in the community, with a warm, loving family life at home.

But then there happened what never should have happened by the standards of ancient Near Eastern and modern American piety. Through no fault of his own, bad things happened to this good man: all of his children were killed in a storm; he got a loathsome, excruciatingly painful disease; his wife turned against him and treated him with contempt; his friends deserted him; he was the laughing stock of the community (which is always maliciously glad to see the mighty fall); he ended up sitting alone in the dirt scratching his hideous itching body with a broken piece of pottery. And as if all that were not enough, some well-meaning but incompetent pastoral counselors came around to tell him that he must have done something really bad or God wouldn't have punished him so severely.

And how did Job respond to all his misery? Well, he did not say, "This will be a good learning experience for me when it is all over." Or "God must have some good purpose in mind for me through all this suffering." Or "God will never give me a greater burden than I can bear." Or "If I only have faith enough, God will make everything come out right." Nor did he say: "Thy will be done." Or: "Your grace is sufficient for me." Or "*I rejoice* in my suffering, knowing that suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope."

He didn't say or do anything of the things pious people are supposed to say and do in the midst of suffering. He was not patient; he complained bitterly. He was not calm and resigned in his misfortune; he treated himself to an orgy of whining self-pity. He did not "turn his life over to the Lord": he was literally mad as hell at the Lord.

He did pray, but his prayers were sheer blasphemy: "It's all your fault. You are the one who is doing all this to me, and it's not fair. I have trusted you and obeyed your commandments, and look what I get for it. I may not be perfect, but I certainly don't deserve all this. Why do you make good people like me suffer and let all those wicked people get along so well? You are cruel and unjust, and I wish that you would just go away and leave me alone. But no, you won't even leave me alone long enough for me to swallow my spit. Or better yet, why don't you come down out of your safe heavenly heights and give me a chance to lay my case before you instead of hiding up there like a coward."

And God answered Job. But if Job did not act like a pious believer is supposed to act, neither did God act like the God of Israel (not to mention a compassionate Friend who understood the pain and misery that led to Job's blasphemous outbursts); he responded with what one commentator calls "a great heavenly sneer":

"Who do you think you are questioning me and the way I run the world? What right does a little pip-squeak like you have to find fault with almighty God? Shut up for a minute and *I* will ask *you* some questions: where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth—tell me about it, since you know so much? who rules the seas and provides for all the animals? who controls the rising and setting of the sun, and governs the coming and going of the seasons, and makes it rain so that the desert blooms? who placed the constellations in the heavens? who controls the powers of chaos and destruction and darkness? what makes you think you are wise enough and powerful enough to do *any* of these things?"

Then Job surprises us again. He does not come back to God with the obvious answer: "I admit that you are bigger than me and can do anything you want. And I admit that you are smarter than me and that I can't beat you in an argument. But you still haven't answered my question. You still haven't told me why bad things happen to good people and why good things happen to bad people. And I still don't think that a God who is loving and just could let that happen."

Instead of the resentful surrender we might have expected, Job suddenly begins *praising* God: "I know that you are all-powerful and that you can do

everything you plan. I have spoken about great things I do not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. In the past I knew of you only what I heard, but now I have seen you with my own eyes. So I am ashamed of all I have said, and repent in dust and ashes" (42:1ff.).

The Word

Now what shall we make of this strange unsatisfying story of a man who in one moment screams his blasphemous protest against God's injustice—then suddenly turns around and praises God, even though his terrible suffering was still there and his questions about it still unanswered? What shall we make of this strange story of a God who seems to be such a harsh, unfeeling, sarcastic bully?

Well, I don't know either. Job remains a great out-of-place puzzle in the Bible. But I believe that we are told at least four things here, and that in a kind of back-handed way they contain good news for suffering people.

The Possibility of Prayer

Let me say the easiest thing first. The good news of Job is that we are free to pray, no matter how bad our prayers are, and God will listen and answer.

We may feel that it is necessary to keep up a pious and orthodox front in the presence of other people, but we don't have to be pious and orthodox in the presence of God. In his presence we can be honest about how we really feel. We can even dare to be blasphemous in expressing our outrage about what he is doing or not doing in our lives and in the world around us. God will not reject us, or punish us, or withdraw from us because we have approached him with the wrong attitude and a bad theology. He will stick with us and answer our prayers—even though what he says and does may be what he knows we need most and not what we think we need most.

The Center of the Universe

The second point is not so easy, nor is it in itself good news. But it is the first thing that has to be said to get to the good news: we are not the center of the universe, and what happens to us is not all that important in God's grand scheme of things.

We and our families are not all that important. When I think of the millions of people who have lived and died before me, and the millions of people throughout the world who are living and dying around me, and the millions of people who will live and die after I am gone (if we don't blow up the earth or make it uninhabitable by our exploitation and fouling of the natural environment)—when I think of those countless millions of people, my little life and death and the life and death of those I love doesn't make all that much difference.

In fact the whole human race is not all that important. When I think of

how quarrelsome, violent, self-destructive, and rapacious the human species is, I am not so sure that we “rational” animals are so superior after all to those so-called “lower species” who at least live in accordance with their own nature and the purpose for which they were created. When I think of the great oceans and rivers and mountains and forests and plains that were there before any of us came along and will still be there after we are gone, and when I look up and see the vast expanse of the heavens, it seems absurd to believe (as Calvin taught) that God created all things for the well-being of us self-important little human beings.

Indeed, our whole planet is not all that important. When I consider that it is only a tiny little speck among the billions of celestial bodies and that like them it too will sooner or later run down or blow up (if we don’t blow it up first), then not only all the tragedies and triumphs of my little life but even those of whole nations and civilizations seem almost comically pretentious and trivial.

In other words, long before Copernicus learned it, Job learned that we do not live in a “geocentric” universe. He also learned what even we modern people have not yet learned, that we do not live in an *anthropocentric* universe either.

No, it is not good news to see how insignificant we are in the grand scheme of things. It might or might not help a little to put our little problems and needs and suffering in larger perspective. It might or might not free us from a narcissistic preoccupation with ourselves and make us more sensitive to the needs and problems and suffering of other people. It might or might not make us a little more willing to use our natural environment in such a way that there is at least a chance for there to be future generations who live in a life-sustaining world. But it would finally lead to a bleak, weary stoicism if we all learned from Job is how unimportant we are. Unless we learned a third thing from him.

God Endures

While it is true that we do not live in a geocentric or anthropocentric universe, it is also true that we do live in a theocentric universe. God was there and in charge of things long before we came along, and he will continue to be there and in charge long after we are gone.

I and my family, with all our little or great joys and sorrows, disappointments and achievements, failures and successes—we come and go, but God remains.

Republican as well as Democratic administrations, times of economic depression as well as times of economic prosperity, unjust as well as just societies, little and big wars—they all have their day, but God outlasts them all.

The United States of America and Russia, capitalism and Marxism, the whole of modern technological civilization like all the great civilizations of the past—they rise and flourish and decay and die, but God has no beginning and no end.

Our planet earth, it too will sooner or later come to an end whether or not

we commit cosmic suicide—but even then the Creator and ruler of the universe will still be there.

And like Job, when he got that point, strangely enough we too can praise God.

Despite all our hard work, our pursuit of education, our political involvement, our insurance policies and investment plans, what we can do to guarantee our own and our families' security and well-being is very limited.

Even though we have learned through medical science to prolong life in miraculous ways, death still catches up with all of us sooner or later.

Despite all the combined efforts of theologians and preachers and philosophers and teachers and youth workers and conservative and liberal and revolutionary political leaders, our world is no closer than it was 5000 years ago to controlling the demons of greed and lust and hatred in the human heart.

Despite all our religious and political and economic theories and plans and programs and institutions, we are no more able than people in Job's day to achieve enduring justice and order and peace in the human community.

But the good news is that we are free of the terrible burden and necessity of being ultimately responsible for what happens to us and the world around us. And we don't *have* to make sense out of it all and grasp why things happen as they do and how everything fits together. There is a God who always has been, and is, and always will be at work preserving and ordering and ruling individual lives and the world of nature and human history—the whole universe—within the limits he has set for all creaturely reality according to his good and wise and just and powerful will.

And that brings me to my last point.

The Chief End of "Man"

Long before Calvin and the Reformed tradition came along to echo it, Job learned that the chief end of "man" is to glorify and serve God. God is not there to answer our questions, solve our problems and give us everything we want and think we need. He is not there to serve us; we are here to serve him.

God is not there to give us personal happiness, health and success, or even to save us from our sins so that we can go to heaven instead of hell when we die.

God is not even there—and this is the hardest thing of all for me to say—to guarantee the success of our quest for political and economic justice for the poor and oppressed, the success of our quest for a life-sustaining environment for our children and future generations, or the success of our attempt to avoid a nuclear holocaust and achieve world peace.

God is not there to serve even the highest and best of our concerns.

We are there to serve him in joy *and* in sorrow, in health *and* in sickness, in success *and* in failure, in life *and* in death.

And that is good news. It is the good news of freedom from self-centered utilitarian religion that instead of worshipping God only uses him for our personal or social self-interest. It is the good news of freedom to love God for himself and not for what he can give us or do for us—even when we do not

understand or approve of the way he runs the universe.

Perhaps it is not enough to pray the prayer of the old rabbi who said, "I do not want your paradise. I do not want your coming world. I want you and you only." But until we learn to pray *at least* that much, then we will never come to know and honor and love and serve the God who alone is the alpha and omega, the source and meaning and goal not only of our lives but of all creation.

Much more needs to be said, of course. But any of us who are too sure that we can say more had better be careful that we do not in fact say far less.

A Prayer

Lord of the universe, help us to have the faith of Job, knowing that we need not be afraid that we and our fellow human beings will lose out if we love you above all else. In Jesus Christ you have shown us that your power *over* us (and all people everywhere) is also the power of your love *for* us (and all people everywhere).