

Beyond Why *Job 23:1- 24:1*

Lori Archer Raible

Selwyn Avenue Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, North Carolina

Job is a leader. He has surrounded himself with good people. When your back is up against the wall, go to Job: a great guy to work for, honest partner, prosperous, humble, and a true friend. He developed a booming family business, had seven sons and three daughters, already set up 529 college funds for the grandkids, and probably gladly tithes ten percent on the Sabbath. Culture, community, God, and even Job himself agree he sits at a table full of blessings. His family eats and vacations together. Year after year they send out the beach photo with everyone wearing white and khaki. And because Job is, well, Job, we look forward to seeing it every time. Job has been living the dream.

Except now, the dream has turned to nightmare. Job forces us to put away our preconceived notions of what it means to be a “good Christian.” The drama has no sugar coating, no manners, no excuses or rationalizations. Job is honest about what it means to suffer. Profoundly horrible things happen to people who do not deserve them. Overwhelming headlines bombard us with the realities of war, starvation, storms, abuse, school shootings, cancer, and car accidents. Surely each of us has endured suffering. A few having survived their own worst nightmare. Yet none of us understands *why* we are forced to bear such pain.

Why in God’s Name does the God whom we proclaim as loving, powerful, and all knowing allow us to suffer? And where is the Good News in the tangles and depths of horrific misery? Well into Job’s saga, he has endured loss beyond his wildest imagination. His life’s work and passion are gone: the plentiful herds of livestock are killed with swords, the sheep and servants are burned to death, and his very own children (along with their families) are decimated by a catastrophic windstorm.

A man of faith, grief-stricken Job responds according to religious and cultural standards. He tears his robe, shaves his head, falls to his knees in prayer, and blesses God. We too have a cultural formula for dealing with loss, even though our grief does not tend to fit as nicely into a construct. Caring Bridge, obituaries, visitation, and meal schedules are all part of our communal response of caring and grieving. After this horrific day, we drop off a meal, pray Job will get through the loss, and go home to hug our own children. After all, what could we possibly say? Is this not the appropriate place to expect Job’s suffering to stop? But for Job, just as his restless eyes open in the early morning hours, his chest aches as he remembers that the nightmare of yesterday was not a dream. As he prays for God to take the pain away, the phone rings. His physician delivers the bad news, “It’s leprosy.”

Shocked, Job immediately searches for answers on the internet: “*A bacterial infection with unknown origins at the time.*” Job could expect cracked and hardened skin, painful lesions, skin malformations, numbing disfigurement of his limbs, nerve damage, eventual eyesight loss, and perhaps worst of all, a social stigma resulting in complete isolation.¹ Job heard the death sentence loud and clear.

“Hey, you won’t believe it, did you hear about Job? He’s infected. *Leprosy.*”

Why would God let something like this happen to someone like Job? What happens next to Job is what happens to most of us when we suffer loss or disease (God forbid both). Three friends from the “Temple care team” show up. Like many good faith communities, they may not know what to *say*, but initially they know what to *do*. Silently, Job’s friends sit with him on the ground observing how deeply broken, devastated, and heart-wrenchingly empty he is. They keep Shiva for the required custom of seven days. Then things get a little messy. Throughout the rest of Job’s tale, they engage Job in a series of passionate and combative discussions. The story of Job suffering is not a story of one. Even if he feels isolated, even if he is judged, abandoned, forgotten, or hopeless, Job’s friends are in the story. As God’s children, whether we like it or not, our suffering is never just about us. Some folks say, “This is between ‘me and God.’”

Well, no it’s not. It may be for a while, but our grief and suffering affect the people around us regardless of what we share. Job’s question of why he suffers is somehow tangled up with what those around him do and say in response to his agony. Their interactions do not answer the big question of *why*, but God is surely paying attention to how they interact. God is in the room.

Because this is a tale of creative poetry and myth-like drama, not only are we invited inside, but perhaps we too are given permission to engage in a bit of creative interpretation.² For the following three holy conversations between Job and his friends are two parts scripture and one part imagination.

After a full week of grief, Job’s friends come to check on him. He finally breaks his silence. No, these are not quiet whispers of sadness; Job is crying out in despair and brokenness with loud, angry weeping. He shouts things you and I feel and think, but often do not have the nerve to even whisper in front of other people: “I wish I were never born, so then I would not have to feel this pain (3:11)! I hate my life. I can’t *believe* God would do this. I am *not* resting. I am *not* keeping quiet. I am *not* okay! End it now, God, because my life is over. You have ruined my life; I am living a personal *hell*, and I do not know why! Why? Why?”

Job’s friend Eliphaz gives it all he’s got. “Uh well, listen Job, we came all this way. We sat with you for seven days and felt *really* bad for you because you have helped so many people over the years. Job, the leprosy is starting to make your face look weird. Honestly, we don’t want to catch it. We technically did what we were supposed to do, and well, how can we say this? Your behavior is making us uncomfortable. After all, your grieving time is officially over. Hang in there, Buddy; all things happen for a reason. Buck up, give it over to *God*, and pray because all this must be part of God’s larger plan.” “Your words have supported those who were stumbling, and you have made firm the feeble knees. But now it has come to you, and you are impatient. It touches you and you are dismayed” (4:4-5). “Where’s your faith anyway? Come on, get off that floor. *You need* to call that fancy doctor over at Duke. *You need* to join a support group. *You need* to listen to this great motivational speaker. *You need* to just push, push, push. I’m sure you didn’t mean all those negative things you said, Job. It’s not so bad. God can use this. Pray. Repent. Get focused on God and not yourself.”

Job is swirling. He’s overwhelmed, exhausted, and shocked. Yet, he manages to give his friend an honest reply. “You know what, Eli, I don’t want your advice. I *have* been focused on God, and I *did* mean those things I said. My life was rich and full, and I tried every day to do my very best! If I have sinned, I beg God to show me

how. In the meantime, my life is over. 'My flesh is clothed in worms and dirt. My skin hardens, and then breaks, my eye will never again see' (7:5)! Maybe Eli, you could help me understand why?" On his way out, Eli shakes his head and mutters, "I'm not the one with blisters all over my face. Figure it out yourself."

As Eli slinks out, he rolls his eyes at Job's ungratefulness and nods at Bildad who takes another approach. He is hoping to talk some sense into Job and tell him just what he needs to hear. "You know Job, God is just testing you, and God would never give you what you couldn't handle. *'If you are pure and upright, then he will restore you... though your beginning was small, Job, your latter days will be very great'* (8:6). What doesn't kill you will only make you stronger Job." Bildad is a little bit like Joel Osteen. He doesn't seem like it at first, but he is. *If you sin, then you are punished*. The inverse of course is, *if you are good enough, then God will bless you*. Joel Osteen, a popular leader of people, says to Job, "Keep doing the right things. God is building character in you, and you are passing that test. Remember, the greater the struggle, the greater the reward."³ To which Job sarcastically shouts, "Are you kidding me, Joel? You've got to be joking. I *loathe* my life. How dare you stop me from talking about the bitterness of my soul? How do *you* know how I feel? How do *you* know what makes me stronger? My character was fine before my entire family was killed. My strength was okay before these scabs on my face. Don't you see *this is more* than I can handle? 'God has poured me out like milk, and then curdled me like cheese' (10:1-10)." Underneath Job is pleading, "Just tell me God, *why*?"

Scripture indicates that Zophar cannot accept Job's forthright and sarcastic defense. He is so overwhelmed with the magnitude of Job's protest that he accuses Job of being downright wicked. Imagine Job is furious now, raging, and his third friend is in firing range. "You want to hear this, Zophar? God has taken my family. My relatives and friends have failed me (no offense). The guests in my house have forgotten me. My servants ignore me. My breath is repulsive to my wife! Why, Zophar, why do you torture me like God does?" (19:17). To which maybe his friend responds as briefly and practically as he can, "So Job, what's the prognosis on this stuff? Do you know what you may have done to cause it? Because folks who fight these situations generally don't do so well. You should live today like you are going to die tomorrow! Sky dive, hike, run an Ironman."

After an awkward silence, Zophar continues, "Look Job. It could be a lot worse. My neighbor's ex-wife's cousin had leprosy. It was horrible. She had a really hard time. I'd tell you about it, but let's just say, 'to fill her belly, God sent his fierce anger into her and rained it upon her as her food. Utter darkness was laid upon her for her treasure' (20:26). Scary stuff. Anyway, chin up. Stay strong. I'm sure its not going to be that bad. Look, I gotta scoot, my golf group is waiting, and well, I missed last week because we were mourning. You're doing great. Just call if you need anything. Better yet, text me."

If only Job's friends had remembered how powerful their presence was in silence and solidarity. Attempting to *fix* someone else's suffering because we are uncomfortable or burdened with it is not the same as showing up and being fully present. Zophar barely makes it to his tee time. "Sorry guys, just stopped by Job's. What a mess." Another golfer says, "Man, I feel bad for Job, but he's never struggled a day in his life. It finally caught up to him." "Did you hear about the tax mix-up he had last year?" "Yeah, and remember that son of his? He was always pushing the limits.

I'm sure he was up to no good. He probably brought it on himself." "Now that you mention it, Job was always eating processed foods, drinking one too many; he never slowed down. It's no shock he got leprosy."

All that talk of Job's friends is speculation, and every bit is irrelevant to his suffering. Albeit insensitive, deep down his friends are trying to explain why a good and loving God would allow a good and decent person to suffer. Their acquired brand of answers may be the worst kind, because the conclusion is that he brought it on himself. *Those* people suffer because they are lazy. *That* woman was abused because she was annoying. *Those* people died because their religion is different than ours. Why can't I get pregnant? *Because* I made mistakes when I was young. Why did he die? *Because*, I didn't appreciate him enough. Why did I lose my job? *Because*, I was not dedicated enough. The argument that we suffer because we aren't good enough is as wrong as Pat Robertson's argument that the folks in New Orleans were hit by Katrina because they were sinners. That sort of nonsense lets us off the hook. Why would we have to help people who brought it on themselves?

Certainly there are consequences for our actions, but does God bring them to us? Don't we build machines of magnificent proportions: metal and wheels and music and cell phones? Then we drive them faster and faster. So yes, there is little room for human error with major consequences.⁴ Our bodies have cells that sometimes over-produce for lots of different reasons, and we can't figure out *why* all the time. In the midst of the miracles of modern medicine, our bodies don't always hold up. Cancer still stinks.

Our earth spins, as it has always spun with patterns and rhythms and balance, but it is also full of living, shifting, breathing, moving particles and parts. Land and sky and water were creatively, brilliantly, and perfectly made, yet imperfectly kept. Hurricanes and fires occur, and we don't fully understand. Does God cause all these things? There is one major belief that prevents us from fully believing that God could or would want us to suffer such horrific catastrophe. God is good and loving. Because Job also believed God is good and loving, he had to ask, "*Why* then, would I be made to suffer?"

The *why*, like my *why* and your *why*, is wrapped in a sigh too deep for words (Romans 8:26) and a cry so raw it hurts, and there is no box to contain it. Laments are loud and honest and real, and God expects them in order that we remain faithful. If Job had completely given up on God, wouldn't he have become quiet? Wouldn't he have quit arguing all together? As Wendell Berry has said, "The distinguishing characteristic of absolute despair is silence."⁵ Job does not accept his situation because Job never stops assuming God exists and that God is all mighty and loving. Even when he feels completely abandoned by God, Job is not resigned. Instead of going silent, he shouts.

This is why his friends are so vital to the story. Even if Job believes God is not listening and his idiot friends inflict guilt and stress and despair, they *hear* Job. They could have done so much better, but if all they do is judge and berate him, they also hear him cry out to God. The friends are certainly not a perfect faith community, but they matter. What they all learned through Job's suffering is this: we wouldn't ask why we suffer if we thought God was wrathful, judgmental, and punitive. If we thought God was vindictive, we would expect and understand suffering. A score-keeping God fits our human constructs of hierarchy, control, and achievement.

Up until this point, Job and his friends operated under the assumption *not* that God was evil or sadistic, but rather that God was on the ground. God was in the room with them, intimately committed to a covenant love where God's people keep loyalty and acknowledge God's powerfulness. Job was faithful like that. With desire and trust, Job embodied God's covenant and enjoyed the blessings of his joy. So when his friends deduce Job's suffering to a condition of sinfulness or *less than*, they reduce the mystery of God's passionate love for us to an unfortunate situation that we can somehow manipulate. *If* we are good, *then* God will bless us. But that incorrect perception of God broke down on them, just like it breaks down on us over and over and over. It only makes sense that Job, and thus we, are called to search, seek, and wonder about how our lives with God at the center can feel so *wrong* in our darkest moments. We ask *why* because we know God to be good.

One time God answered the question *why*. The lament was so loud, so painful, so deep and profound. A good man, having done nothing wrong, was betrayed by his friends. He screamed out to his Father, who allowed the unthinkable to occur, the abandonment of a Son by his Father, complete separation from God, otherwise known as Hell. "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" (Matthew 27:46). His father must have been dying a million deaths inside. We all know that real love is vulnerable to suffering. As one theologian wrote, "A god who cannot suffer is poorer than any man."⁶ If God was not good, if God was not loving, God would not suffer. The grief always matches the deep love.

Would we really want God to answer *why*? If God answered, that would mean God's promise in Christ is not what we think. It would mean God's love is conditional, *if* and *then*, cause and effect, earning salvation. We don't want answers. We don't want explanations. We don't want closure as much as we want an end to suffering.

God's act of Christ, incarnate and earthy, cooing and crawling, coughing and sneezing, walking and eating, sleeping, laughing, crying, dying, and lamenting... *Jesus* does not answer *why*. But He is God with us on the ground, in the room, through the tears, with the one who is suffering. Jesus does not answer *why*, but His resurrection grants us a hope and confidence that is far greater than even death.

Job and his friends now understand that life with God is not fair. Suffering is overwhelmingly unfair, and so too is the grace we all receive made true on the cross. Grace is not gifted to us in equal measure. Grace overflows.

Notes

1 "Leprosy," *Wikipedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leprosy>.

2 Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament. The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2003), 294.

3 Joel Olsteen, *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential* (New York Publisher: PaithWords, 2007), 170.

4 James Howell, *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Day 1, 1996.

5 Wendell Berry, *What are People For? Essays* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2010), 59.

6 Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (New York, Harper and Row, 1974), 222.

7 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, v. IV, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, ed. G.W. Bromley (New York, T&T Clark, 2004), 211.