

Scripture Reading for October 10, 2021

Job 8:1-6 (NIV)

¹ Then Bildad the Shuhite replied:

² “How long will you say such things? Your words are a blustering wind.

³ Does God pervert justice? Does the Almighty pervert what is right?

⁴ When your children sinned against him, he gave them over to the penalty of their sin.

⁵ But if you will seek God earnestly and plead with the Almighty,

⁶ if you are pure and upright, even now he will rouse himself on your behalf and restore you to your prosperous state.

Job 23:1-9; 16-17 (NIV)

¹ Then Job replied:

² “Even today my complaint is bitter; his hand is heavy in spite of my groaning.

³ If only I knew where to find him; if only I could go to his dwelling!

⁴ I would state my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments.

⁵ I would find out what he would answer me, and consider what he would say to me.

⁶ Would he vigorously oppose me? No, he would not press charges against me.

⁷ There the upright can establish their innocence before him, and there I would be delivered forever from my judge.

⁸ “But if I go to the east, he is not there; if I go to the west, I do not find him.

⁹ When he is at work in the north, I do not see him; when he turns to the south, I catch no glimpse of him.

¹⁶ God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me.

¹⁷ Yet I am not silenced by the darkness, by the thick darkness that covers my face.¹

John 9:1-5 (NIV)

⁹ As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. ² His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” ³ “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. ⁴ As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. ⁵ While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”

¹ The NRSV translates this significantly differently: “If only I could vanish in darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face!” (See also NET.) The NIV has a glimpse of hope lacking in the NRSV; moreover, Job is far from silent.

Sermon: Job Rants and God is Silent.

Although this is Thanksgiving Sunday, two of the lectionary readings for today are on suffering. One is Psalm 22, which begins with the familiar words of Jesus on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” and the other—as we have just heard—is from Job. It was tempting to skip such passages for something more cheerful on this of all weekends.² While we have much to be thankful to God for—and we have celebrated God’s goodness this morning—we also know that life can be unkind and unfair. It’s often hard to be thankful when life is tough.

Last week I introduced the book of Job and that bizarre wager between God and Satan.³ Oddly, Satan is *never* mentioned again in the book. In fact, those introductory first two chapters are *prose* and now the text switches to Hebrew *poetry*—and in an archaic style at that, such that it evokes the perception of being ancient wisdom.⁴ It contains a series of conversations between Job and his three friends: Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar.⁵ They are presented as coming to show sympathy and provide consolation to a suffering Job.⁶ You will recall that Job’s ten children were all killed when a windstorm destroyed their home.⁷ Moreover, many of Job’s servants were killed by raiders, who also stole his animals.⁸ And Job himself was experiencing unsightly, painful skin ulcers that resulted in his miserable social isolation.⁹

What do you say to a dear friend who is suffering intensely? My advice is to follow what James’ says: “be quick to listen and slow to speak.”¹⁰ Job’s three friends barely recognized him, and they sat with him and mourned in silence for a week.¹¹ Saying nothing but being physically and emotionally present in the moment is, I believe, an excellent first step. It creates a bond; it cements trust. It’s a good idea to help practically too; a person needs food, water . . . and rest. Helping out with groceries and laundry allows the sufferer the time and space to do more urgent tasks.¹² In addition, be a *listening ear*, while being sensitive to the person’s dignity and privacy. They are likely to choose their confident(s) with care—so don’t be offended if it doesn’t turn out to be you!¹³ And as you listen, try to gauge where they are coming from by the *style* of the questions they are asking. If they’re very practical, you might respond by, say, offering to be that reassuring driver who takes them to medical appointments. Don’t

² But one of the purposes of the lectionary is to stop preachers from doing just that!

³ See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Why-Is-This-Happening-To-Me.pdf> .

⁴ Job 42:7-17 returns to prose, possibly added by another editor (esp. 10-17). These prose bookends influence how the middle poetry section is read and understood, along with one’s own theological biases.

⁵ These conversations appear in the form of laments, disputations, and in Job’s case . . . just plain rants!

⁶ Job 2:11. The meaning of their names is lost in time and is not significant.

⁷ Job 1:18-19.

⁸ Job 1:14-15, 17. Furthermore, lightning killed Job’s shepherds and sheep (1:16).

⁹ Job 2:7-8, 13.

¹⁰ James 1:19.

¹¹ Job 2:12-13. To be honest, it was about the only *right* thing they did!

¹² The difference between *urgent* and *important* is critical here. Hospital/doctor’s visits, grieving, visiting a funeral home, etc., are all time-sensitive tasks which require fuel (food) and clear thinking (sleep/rest) and you can help carry their burden.

¹³ If they perceive you as a gossip or prone to put it on Facebook “just for prayer” (!!), don’t be surprised if they clam up.

ask probing questions that threaten their safe space unless you have their trust, and you sense they want to address those kinds of questions.

In the story of Job, it is *he* who speaks first, and Job is so low that he vehemently laments the day he was born!¹⁴ In his anguish, he repeatedly asks “*Why, God, why?*”¹⁵ Remember, Job has no knowledge of the heavenly wager that I mentioned last week.¹⁶ But, as often is the way, once the sufferer asks that theological question, “*Why,*” someone will respond with a seemingly definitive answer!

What “answers” have you heard? Alternatively, what responses have you uttered? How about: “God is in control” or “This is all part of God’s plan for your life.”¹⁷ Consider this one, “We *can’t* know *why* God is *allowing* you to suffer like this; it’s a mystery, but there *is* a reason for everything and one day . . . after you die if not before, you will know.”¹⁸ [Ouch!] Or “Your suffering is like a refining fire, you will be a stronger, better person down the road.”¹⁹ Or, “This is a consequence of free will—did *you* make a bad choice?!”²⁰ We may cringe at such blunt conviction, but I’ve heard all those responses myself.

What do Job’s three friends say? They defend the traditional Jewish view of God as portrayed in Proverbs, Psalms, and Deuteronomy, namely that God is *all-powerful* and causes everything that happens. This is the origin of the Calvinistic “God is in control” perspective. As we heard last week, Job himself agreed that God is the source of *both good and evil*;²¹ “The LORD gives, and the LORD has takes away; blessed be the name of the LORD,” says Job.²² Job’s friends also believed God is *just*, rewarding the good and punishing the wicked; people get what they deserve; you reap what you sow.²³ As I said last week, this [mistakenly] views the relationship between God and humankind as a *contract*. In the minds of Job’s three friends, right living and following God’s ways will deliver security, good health, and prosperity in *this* life. The consequence for wickedness would eventually be misery.²⁴ Therefore, since Job was currently in misery, he *must* have sinned. And given the *extent* of his punishment he must have been *really* wicked!²⁵ As we heard in our first reading, they urged him to humbly ask for God’s forgiveness. Their contract theology told them that if Job did that, then God would raise him up again and bless him

¹⁴ See Job 3. Some see this as Job *cursing* God the Creator (i.e., a euphemism). However, assuming a *continuity of thought* between chapters 1-2 and 3, it contextually makes more sense (to me) to view Job as *not* cursing God, despite his strong rhetoric. This is, I suggest, not out of place with some of the forceful language within the psalms that also have a ‘woe-is-me-in-my-unjust-calamity’ feel about them, without actually claiming the psalmist was also cursing God.

¹⁵ Job 3:11, 12, 16, 20, 23.

¹⁶ See [2].

¹⁷ This also ties in with Calvin’s predestination and is a feature of traditional Presbyterianism.

¹⁸ This is the “hindsight is 20-20” reason or, perhaps, “you will be rewarded in heaven”! Some argue that your particular suffering is part of the “greater good” that God has in mind for the world.

¹⁹ Alternatively, “What does not kill you makes you stronger.”

²⁰ Evidently God is not to blame here—only the victim! Note, Jesus *rebukes* that perspective in John 9:1-5.

²¹ Job 2:10. See also: Deut 28; Isa 30:19–20; 45:5–7; Lam 3:37–38; 42:11; Amos 3:5–6.

²² Job 1:21.

²³ Job 4:7-8 (Eliphaz); 8:3-6 (Bildad); 11;13-15 (Zophar); see also Prov 11:18; 22:8; (Hos 10:12-13).

²⁴ “Why do the wicked prosper?” was consequently another Old Testament question (Jer 12:1; Ps 73:3)!

²⁵ This also follows from Num 32:23—“Be sure your sin will find you out!” God knows all. . .

with material things—after all, there was no real notion of an afterlife at that time, so the only meaningful “benefits” are in the here and now.²⁶ The story does not comment on how God could replace his dead children! Because Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar all believe this theological perspective, they blame Job—they blame the victim, such is their “pastoral care”! Neither they—nor Job—know what we readers know, that God himself sees Job as *blameless*.²⁷ And so we begin to see how the writer has created a scenario that critiques traditional Jewish thinking. All this can be summarized in three premises:

1. God is all-powerful and causes everything that happens.
2. God is just, rewarding the good and punishing the wicked; people get what they deserve.
3. Job is a good person.²⁸

Job’s friends accepted the first two and rejected the third. They therefore encouraged Job to acknowledge he wasn’t as righteous as he thought he was, to lament and repent. Job, however, had a clear conscience before God.²⁹ In his view, he had *not* reaped what he had sowed but was the recipient of pointless evil, seemingly random natural disasters and—on top of it all—grave personal illness. Life was therefore unfair! Consequently, Job affirmed (1) and (3), and questioned (2), whether God was truly just. Instead of prayer and lament, he wanted a fair legal trial to present his case before God—and hopefully to be vindicated, as we heard in our second reading this morning.³⁰

The three friends *think* they speak for God as they defend traditional Jewish theology.³¹ Job rejects their advice. In fact, as the conversations continue it is clear that no one is really listening but simply talking past each other. That can be part of our life experience too, which is one reason we are drawn to this story. When we are suffering, our Christian friends can also speak of God in ways we find unsatisfying and unhelpful.³² We therefore eventually stop listening to them, and that can compound our sense of loneliness; no one really understands what we are going through.³³

Job too has his deep lows,³⁴ his dark night of the soul, but it is there that he finds courage to take his complaint directly to God, rather than respond to his friends. Job wants to *argue* with God, his adversary, as only divine wisdom will resolve this conundrum.³⁵ Yet God is frustratingly absent and

²⁶ It should be noted that Job never asks to be restored to his former greatness.

²⁷ Job 1: (1), 8; 2:3. Moreover, even at the end of the book of Job, when God finally speaks to him in chapters 38-41, God does not dispute Job’s claim of being blameless.

²⁸ Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, 37. See also: Rice, *Suffering and the Search for Meaning*, 106–7.

²⁹ Job 27:5-6; Job 29—31.

³⁰ Job 23:1–7; 31:35. This also implies the contract theology is flawed.

³¹ We will discover in Job 42:7-9 that this is *not* the case!

³² At times, perhaps in grief and anger, our rhetoric can become heated in light of their certainty and forthrightness.

³³ In my own case, this drove me to *reading* and discovering new-to-me Christian writers and theology that proved life-giving. See: Reddish, *Does God Always Get What God Wants?* (Cascade, 2018).

³⁴ For example, Job 7:16-21.

³⁵ I don’t see this as hubris, but as someone who at his core still trusts in God’s character. Job’s integrity, not his pride, is at stake. He has *not* betrayed his family, community, or his God; given his innocence, why then should he betray himself?

unresponsive. In the end, it is that *silence* of God—not God’s attributes—that is so problematic for Job. That silence of God can also be our experience, and some give up and abandon their faith. This story of Job has therefore been described by scholars as *adult* theater. “Adults of serious faith are not readily answered. So much of life is moral silence, absence of explanation, only problematic situations out of which no sense can be made. . .”³⁶ And so Job waits for an answer from an elusive God, and as he waits, he rants, and yet he hopes. Be patient, next week we will consider God’s dramatic response.

In the meantime, today’s passage tells us something about Job himself. On one hand, Job has a passionate belief in God and a sense of justice, and on the other hand, he presents a devastating indictment of a God who seems different to a world of injustice. The remarkable thing about Job is his honesty and that he is prepared to butt heads with God, and to challenge the theological status quo. Nevertheless, in the midst of his suffering, he does not abandon his faith in God’s goodness. We often speak of “the patience of Job,” but that is a mistake. He is *not* patient; he is instead remarkably *steadfast* towards God in the face of life’s bitter circumstances. Even when God is absent and cannot be seen or found,³⁷ he refuses to let go of the idea of a loving God and that justice will ultimately prevail. Those two things—a loving God and justice—speak to me of the basis of our Christian hope. Whatever happens in life, that hope must be protected and nurtured at all costs, for without it we are likely to become bitter people.

What you and I do when faced with our own suffering and of those we love? Do we, like Job, demand an audience with God and proclaim life’s not fair? Do we panic when all we experience is God’s silence? Perhaps, like Job, we are busy trying to tell God what he *should* be doing. And we impatiently shout, “God what are you waiting for? I need this now!” We may want to claim a particular verse and say, “God you *promised*. . .” But this is the entitlement language of contract that we see in Job’s friends—if I do this or that, then you will bless me. Alternatively, do we hang on by a fine thread in faith, wrestling with God and having no peace of mind?

Like Job, in the end we have to wait and listen—not rush around wasting energy—and allow God to meet us at our point of need. We simply wait. (We find it hard to wait, don’t we?) In that restless solitude, *know* the presence of God. Be reassured that as followers of Jesus, we are beloved children of God. We don’t need to frantically search for God, or try and cut deals with him, or try to twist his arm. If we want to encounter the living God, it will always be on his terms. And the first step in that—and I contend that it is often as simple as that, though we love to make it more complicated—is to consciously face towards God, rather than away from him.

³⁶ From Birch, Brueggemann, Fretheim, Petersen, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, 2nd edn (Abingdon, 2005), 411.

³⁷ Job 23:8-9 are the flip side of Ps 139:7-10.

As I said at the beginning, Jesus cried out on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”³⁸ Here, in the midst of Christ’s anguish cry, we find that the depth of human suffering has been taken into God’s very being. God the Father is very much aware of the realities of human suffering, for God’s Son has himself suffered. Paul also reminds us, that in light of Christ’s suffering, the good news is that in Messiah Jesus, we know that nothing—not injustice, not suffering, not even an overwhelming sense of God’s absence—can separate us from God’s love.³⁹ Safe and secure in this good news is grounds for thanksgiving, and in light of that assurance, we are set free to lament and to argue our case with God.

Protest theology is not unique to Job. I want to end today with another person, Habakkuk, who also wondered where God was and what he was doing in the middle of life’s struggles. Chapter 1 begins: *O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?*⁴⁰ But the short book ends with an affirmation of hope using imagery that is most appropriate at harvest time: “Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer and makes me tread upon the heights.”⁴¹

This style is typical of a Jewish lament. Even if the injustice is unresolved, at the conclusion there is usually an expression of faith and hope.⁴² Jewish writers understood that their promise-keeping God was big enough to rage against—and gracious enough not to retaliate. Such confidence is *not* based on the contract theology of Job’s three friends. Neither should we base *our* faith in God being “in control” or as having “a perfect plan.”⁴³ Rather, we fundamentally *trust* in God’s good *character*. And that’s what I encourage us all to do today. This is trusting in God come-what-may, and as New Testament people, we have secure grounds for hope because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.⁴⁴ Amen. Let us pray.

³⁸ Mark 15:34.

³⁹ Rom 8:38.

⁴⁰ Hab 1:1.

⁴¹ Hab 3:17-19.

⁴² As one would imagine, many peoples’ legitimate protests don’t end with such a statement of trust in God regardless of the circumstances. Their fury remains unresolved.

⁴³ See also [19].

⁴⁴ As Christians we have another foundation for that hope, namely the resurrection of Jesus. That is one reason why the resurrection is so important—it tells us that evil will not ultimately prevail. God did not abandon the world he made but came to it in the person of Jesus the Messiah to reveal what God was like. We humans cruelly killed him. But God said “No” and in a unique act of vindication and of divine justice raised Jesus up from the dead. When we face suffering, we can take hope in the fact that God in Christ experienced suffering too and God vindicated him. The resurrection states “no more”; today begins a new age of restoration. The resurrection is a glimpse of the future when one day the God of justice *will* set all wrongs to right. Until then, in the power of the resurrection and with the aid of the Holy Spirit, we work for God’s justice in an unjust and unfair world. No, God is not indifferent to our suffering; that’s one aspect of the incarnation.