

Did Job Get a Passing Grade?

Job 42:1-7, 10-17

Sermon by Richard A. Kauffman

October 24, 2021

42Then Job answered the Lord: 2“I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. 3‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’ Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. 4‘Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you declare to me.’ 5I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; 6therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.”

7After the Lord had spoken these words to Job, the Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite: “My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.

10And the Lord restored the fortunes of Job when he had prayed for his friends; and the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before. 11Then there came to him all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before, and they ate bread with him in his house; they showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the Lord had brought upon him; and each of them gave him a piece of money and a gold ring. 12The Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning; and he had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand donkeys. 13He also had seven sons and three daughters. 14He named the first Jemimah, the second Keziah, and the third Keren-happuch. 15In all the land there were no women so beautiful as Job’s daughters; and their father gave them an inheritance along with their brothers. 16After this Job lived one hundred and forty years, and saw his children, and his children’s children, four generations. 17And Job died, old and full of days.

“Have you considered my servant Job?” That’s a question God asks twice in the book of Job. Yes, for the last 3 Sundays, and yet again this morning we are considering God’s servant, Job.

I remind you what this Job story is about. Job is put to the test: Satan—not the devil but one of the members of God’s heavenly court who was God’s eyes and ears on the earth—wanted to know: would Job continue to praise and honor God if Job had all his wealth and family and health taken away from him? God gave Satan permission to put Job to the test, so long as his life was spared.

Did Job get a passing grade? He didn’t curse God, as Satan assumed he would, although he cursed the day he was born. Job didn’t curse God, despite his wife’s urging him to do so. Instead, he asked whether we shouldn’t accept both the good and the bad from God. So in that sense—he didn’t curse God—he got at least a passing grade.

In time, though, he seems not very accepting of the bad, because he complains mightily about it—to God, no less. As Eugene Peterson says, Job took his complaint to the very top, to God. Did Job get a passing grade? Perhaps only a C if judged on how well he accepted his situation with grace and courage.

Read Job 42:1-7, 10-17.

Divine encounter: 42:1-7

We are not doing this passage justice without reading the God speeches right before it; for the first part of chapter 42 is Job’s response to God who, out of the whirlwind, asked Job some pointed questions: “Who is this who darkens counsel in words without knowledge?” “Where were you when I founded the earth?” “Will he who disputes with [God almighty] be reproved?”

“Will you indeed thwart my case, hold me guilty, so you can be right?” (Robert Alter translation).

In these speeches God led Job on a grand tour of the universe, a lesson in cosmology, meteorology, and zoology. There’s really some exquisite poetry in these speeches. For instance, “The morning stars sang together, and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy.” God even takes delight in the beasts Behemoth and the Leviathan, possibly mythological figures, thought by some to be modeled after the hippopotamus and the crocodile.

But God doesn’t answer Job’s charge that life for him has been unfair and God should set things straight. Essayist and novelist Cynthia Ozick¹ gets it: “God’s answer to Job lies precisely in His not answering; and Job, with lightning insight, comprehends. ‘I have uttered what I did not understand,’ he acknowledges, ‘things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.’ His new knowledge is this: that a transcendent God denies us a god of our own devising, a god that we would create out of her own malaise, or complaint, or desire, or hope, or imagining; or would manufacture according to the satisfaction of our own design. We are part of God’s design; can the web manufacture the spider?” Ozick asks rhetorically.

There are some difficult questions about this passage, having partly to do with the ambiguity of the Hebrew: What did Job repent of? It doesn’t say. What does it mean that he repented in dust and ashes? Was he now regretting having challenged God to deliver justice on Job’s behalf? It’s not clear.

What is clear: after God’s direct speech to Job, Job sees his own situation in a new light; or rather, he sees himself in a new light. Still better, he’s had a fresh encounter with the Divine, and this has brought him to his senses. He no longer wallows in self-pity. He seems not to be bothered anymore that God didn’t meet his demand for justice.

Restoration: 42:10-17

Job’s restoration begins with reconciliation with his friends—the very ones who blamed Job for his own troubles, telling him he must repent and change his ways. Job prayed for those who tormented him. This is one outcome of Job’s fresh encounter with God.

Then Job is restored to the community of the people who really mattered in his life, his true friends and family members; they ministered to his pain, broke bread with him, and gave him small gifts. Here is real pastoral care, here is genuine community, people bearing a member’s burdens.

Finally, Job’s family was restored. Something remarkable happens which went against the patriarchal culture of the day. God promised his daughters, not just his sons, an inheritance. And he gives his daughters names—a sense of identity and character. Job’s restoration, in other words, resulted in an effort to change gender relationships.

Here’s an intriguing question that I like to ask sometimes: What would be lost if something that is dear and meaningful to you no longer existed? For example, what would be lost if Berkeley for some reason had to shut its doors and close up shop? (That would make for an interesting congregational conversation.) In this case, What would be lost if the book of Job weren’t in the Bible? Here are my thoughts on what would be lost:

- Job contains some of the greatest literature, some of the best poetry to come out of the ancient world. It is sometimes compared to the genius of a Shakespeare. Job is taught as

¹ “The Impious Impatience of Job,” *Quarrel and Quandary* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2000)

literature in high school and college classes apart from any religious commitments. The book of Job raises the age-old question: would there be any great art without pain or suffering?

- Job doesn't flinch from asking the really big questions about life: why is there suffering in the world? If God exists, why doesn't God do something about it? In the midst of suffering and pain, where is God? Job wondered about all these dilemmas in life. Most importantly, there are no easy answers to these troubling questions about life. Job's friends glib explanations for his suffering are condemned by God. But God does not judge or criticize Job for asking why? or why me? Theologian Robert McAfee Brown tells this story about his sister, who endured a great tragedy in her life: "My sister, pained by a tragedy in her life, said in more than half-jest to a Jewish friend, 'If I ever make it to heaven, I'm going to line up at the throne of God and ask, "Why did you arrange it so that things like this could happen?"' 'Hattie,' was his instantaneous response, 'it's a very long line.'"² Job may well be ahead of her in that line before the throne of God.
- We generally think Genesis 1 is our sole or main biblical source of creation theology. Not true: along with some creation psalms in the book of Psalms, there is some great creation theology, poetically rendered, in the book of Job. But this creation poetry isn't meant to call attention only to the created order, but to the Creator who brought it into existence.
- The book of Job sheds light on human nature. Job's friends become judgmental; Job himself is self-justifying. Job wonders what is so great about human beings that God should pay so much attention to them; yet Job came to see that he wasn't who he thought he was; he was way more subject to the vagaries of life despite all his wealth and comfort; he eventually came to see himself as a sinful human being, as all humans are. We were created to be a little lower than the angels; yet we are not gods.
- Despite modern science and technology, not everything about life can be fixed. Job reminds us that, in spite of our best efforts to make things better, some things have to be endured rather than fixed.
- A basic question the book of Job asks us all: **Is God worthy of praise only when life is going well? Or is God worthy of praise regardless of our circumstances?**
- Job asks more questions than it answers. It raises the imponderable and unfathomable questions about life and death, God and human existence. It stretches us into territory that can makes us feel uncomfortable. In the final analysis, we're dealing with mystery. Mystery, remember, can't be explained; to try to explain it, is to explain it away. We need to live into mystery, and embrace it.

The Book of Job isn't an anti-Christian book, but it is a pre-Christian book.

- There is no Cross in Job: Although Job had a cross to bear, it appears as though he bore it alone. In the New Testament we discover a God who suffers with us, bears our burdens, knows our pain. But a God who only suffers with us isn't enough....
- There is no Resurrection in Job: although Job said he knows his Redeemer lives, there is no resurrection hope for Job. Though he lived a long and fruitful life after his restoration, he still had to die one day, die without hope in a future resurrection.

Nevertheless, just as we shouldn't jump too quickly from the Cross to the Resurrection and thereby diminish the gravity and grace of the cross, we shouldn't jump too quickly from Job

² *Creative Dislocation: The Movement of Grace*

to Jesus, and thereby slight the profound theological and existential questions Job asks. We need to keep considering God's servant Job, as God suggested.

I want to conclude with reference to several hymns and songs in our congregational repertoire. We've been singing as our hymn of the month, "There's a wild hope in the wind" (VT 828), by Lora Braun, a Canadian who graduated from Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary. The *Voices Together* hymnal committee asked her to change the line, "The future is dim." It seemed too grim and dark. She said no. She had a reason for saying no: she was fighting cancer. It was a battle she lost. She died right before the new hymnal came out. She didn't even get to see her own work in print—a Job story, to be sure.

The other illustration involves two hymns in the rust-colored hymnal, *The Mennonite Hymnal*. This is the hymnal we used before the blue one we retired here last week. That hymnal included a brilliant juxtaposition of two hymns: "Praise to God Immortal Praise" is found on page 524. It's a great hymn of praise to God:

"Praise to God, immortal praise, for the love that crowns our days, bounteous source of every joy, let thy praise our tongues employ."

It is immediately followed by "Lord, Should Rising Whirlwinds" (525). In fact, the versification continues on from number 524: the first verse of 525 is verse six. This hymn draws from the final verses of the prophet Habakuk, which describes a Job-like scene:

"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."³

"Can we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" That is the question we're left with from the book of Job!

Keep considering God's servant Job.

³ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*](#). (1989). (Hab 3:17–18). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

