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“Believing in a God Who Cares”

Job 42:1-6

James 5:7-11

Have you ever wondered if God really cares about you and the problems that you face? I would suggest that if you have not, it is doubtful that you are actually a member of the human race. For those of us who are members of the human race, the Book of Job from the Old Testament has a very important message to give us about the nature of God and his relationship to us.

We have most often viewed this book as an attempt to explain the problem of suffering and evil. The principle idea that we can all recollect from Job is his “patience,” and we assume that this is the main message to us. Yet, Job does not actually offer a clear explanation of the problem of suffering. It is more accurate to say that the problem of Job is the problem of the “absence” of or “silence” of God. The questions addressed in this book are such as these. Does God have anything to do with this world of human beings and their affairs? How can the mortal person ever get into touch with this High God? How can this God ever be imminently concerned with the affairs of humanity? Seen in this perspective, the message of Job embraces all of humankind—those who suffer and those who watch while others suffer; those who experience meaninglessness and those who are afraid to risk experience because they may be confronted with meaninglessness; those who try to rationalize the distance of God, and even those whose fear has paralyzed them into a deep silence. The experience of “God-forsakenness” lurks in the deep recesses of human

life. What better way is there to deal with this universal experience than to bring it to light by telling a story?

The story begins with a description of Job, a wealthy, God-fearing sheik. Satan challenges God with the claim that were Job to fall from his happy circumstances, he would curse God. Accepting the challenge, God consents to the testing of Job. Job loses his wealth, his animals, his servants, and even his sons and daughters. His house collapses, Satan goes so far as to inflict all kinds of physical suffering on Job.

Enter Job's three "friends." *Friends* must be put within quotation marks because they are not really friends. They cannot enter into Job's experience. They can approach it only from "the outside." Their pat answers indicate this. Even seven days of sitting with Job will not suffice to make them sensitive to the real plight in which Job finds himself. Their answers are the cold, external, orthodox reasoning of the theological tradition.

Their first answer is that suffering is the consequence of sin. Job rejects the pious theological language of his "friends." The answer may seem a perfectly rational one. Righteousness equals prosperity; unrighteousness equals deprivation. Job, however, knows better, and so do we. It just does not always work out that way. It is not only the bad folks who get cancer, or lose their jobs, or get robbed.

The second answer is that suffering is educational and instructive. It helps us to mature. Eliphaz is the "friend" who expresses this answer the clearest. Although this answer probably in Job's case has more merit, it still does not

really speak to Job's situation. Why should Job, a righteous man by the law, need further education? Neither of the two answers applies satisfactorily to Job's situation. We should note here that Job's so-called "friends" offered theology when all that was needed was friendship. We will do well to learn from this. When you or I go to see a friend who has just suffered some bad or tragic problem, we do not have to go with answers. When someone is suffering, what he or she needs the most is people who care and love them to be with them and to let them know that they are not alone.

Therefore, rejecting the rationalizations of his companions, Job would like to make his own defense before God. He even challenged God to such a meeting. The storm clouds began to form, and the wind began to blow stronger. Out of the whirlwind came the voice of the One for whom Job had cried. But then Job found that rather than interrogating God, he was the one interrogated. In fact, in such rapid order came the questions that Job had only the opportunity to stand and listen.

Job 38:1-4 says, "Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirl-wind: 'Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me if you have understanding.'"

And so it goes for four chapters as God puts Job on the witness stand.

Job's primary problem, and it is a problem we all share, is that of measuring the righteousness of God in terms of his own righteousness. Now give Job his due credit: he had kept the law! But in those moments when God seems far

away in the awful depths of divine silence, we, like Job, seek to justify ourselves by our law-keeping record. Taking refuge in our righteousness, however correct the assessment of our righteousness may be, always results in our trying to remake God in our own image. When we demand that God live up to our expectations, we always limit God.

In response to God's absence, we, like Job, often call upon God and demand that God justify the divine silence to us. Our human righteousness, however, cannot coerce God to cross the distance, to break the silence, or to compensate for the absence. In the midst of the divine interrogation Job is brought to the moment of crisis, and his words form our text.

“I know that you can do all things,
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. ...
Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. ...
I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees you;
therefore I despise myself,
and repent in dust and ashes.”

Do you see how a complete reversal has taken place in the story of Job? The questioner, Job, has now become the questioned. To accept the reversal from being the questioner to being the questioned is to repent, to have a fundamental change of mind and will, to experience a radical change in

perspective. More fundamental than sin against the law is the sinful condition of living over against God, always demanding that God conform to our expectations. Job's repentance consists primarily in turning from his dependence in his own self-righteousness to pure faith in the unfathomable righteousness of God. Therefore the real story of Job does not take place in the courts of heaven where it begins, nor in the dust and ashes of the field of Uz where Job contends with both his visitors and with God. Ultimately the story takes place in the heart of Job. Once he had known God by the hearing of the ear, but now he sees God!

The dreaded distance between humankind and God had been bridged the only way it could be—not with Job rising up in righteousness to God but in God's coming into the plight of Job. Job does not receive an answer which matches his question; he receives a presence which matches his condition. It will not do for us to try to hide in our own goodness, and our self-righteous protests will not force God to answer all our questions or pull us out of every bad situation. Only a God of grace can bridge the chasm between defensive human righteousness and the perfect righteousness of God. The presence of God is sheer grace, and it is what we need the most!

Grace, however, always evokes a response. If grace means basically "gift," then the gift must be received and accepted. Job's response to grace is to assume the responsibility for his attempt to justify himself by his own righteousness. To change this orientation of one's life is simply to repent. In

short, the story of Job is not so much an explanation of evil and suffering as it is a narrative sermon on justification by grace through faith.

So often in our problems of life, we call out to God for an answer. If only God would give us an answer! Any answer! But rather than answering, God calls our very condition into question. This is exactly what is accomplished in the other story of the silence of God, told in the Gospels of the New Testament. This time not Job, but the suffering Son of Man is tried on trumped-up charges, is led through experiences of the lowest of degradation, and finally is taken to the cross. Through it all, God seems to be distant and silent. No word of God breaks the silence between the intermittent calls of derision and mocking. God does not raise a voice of protest when the nails are driven into hands and feet. Only a voice calling from the cross is heard, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” Here is the supreme hour of God-forsakenness. Dumb nature withdraws its lights, and there is “darkness over the whole land.”

Yet in this hour of divine silence the unsurpassable miracle of divine grace takes place. Behind the silence God is actualizing the divine plan for all the Jobs of this world. In the darkest night of human history, when God says not a word, God accomplishes the work of redemption. When God had seemed most remote and the divine silence had bordered on the intolerable, paradoxically God was drawing near—nearer than ever to the human condition. When Christ took upon himself the God-forsakenness of this Job-like world, the only real answer to Job’s situation was finally given. Job’s defensive self-

righteousness must die for the divine answer to be real for him. His own achievement records and report cards have to be buried; his own pride has to face a Damascus Road surrender. Job's condition of self-made righteousness, more serious than suffering without an answer, has to die the death of repentance. In the silence of that death the divine presence of grace is seen as the only real answer to the Jobs of this world. The God who takes away our guilt will in the end hear our anguished cries of suffering. When we repent of trusting in ourselves and our own goodness, the God of grace will come to us, and we will know that he is a God who cares. This knowledge that God cares is more important than any answer to any question. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.