

Pleading Guilty

Job 19:23-27a | Psalm 17:1-8 | 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17 | Luke 20:27-38

JOB 19:23-27A

²³ ‘O that my words were written down! O that they were inscribed in a book! ²⁴ O that with an iron pen and with lead they were engraved on a rock for ever! ²⁵ For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; ²⁶ and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, ²⁷ whom I shall see on my side [myself], and my eyes shall behold, and not another.

INTRODUCTION

“The Bald Man and the Fly” is a fable, often attributed to Aesop, that supposed storyteller from the seventh century BCE. It tells the story of a bald man, having been bitten by a fly on his head, slapping himself rather hard to kill the fly. The fly mocks him, pointing out that he is only harming himself more. And the man responds that even further injuries would be worth it if he could simply destroy the fly.¹ This story is the most likely origin of the modern phrase: ‘adding insult to injury.’ When one is injured, one must be rather careful about adding to or compounding the pain.

And this is even more true when the injury is significant. These last few years have seen much injury. Long held relationships have crumbled as the world has polarized even more. Wars have emerged. Debts have been incurred. Illnesses, mental and otherwise, have been diagnosed. The pandemic has claimed thousands of lives. We all know the pain of losing a loved one, in fact, the heartbreak and grief. From our Old Testament reading this evening, we find a man who has also suffered greatly, a man who gives voice to his grief. And in listening to his words, I think we will learn this, our hope is found in redemption, not vindication. But in order to see this, we must first consider the story of Job.

1. JOB’S PAIN

It’s not necessarily obvious from this text, but Job is in unimaginable pain. If you are familiar with his story, you are probably aware that Job has suffered great loss. His lands and livestock, his means of sustaining himself have been destroyed. His children—seven sons and three daughters—have all been killed in a single night.² And he has, himself, been stricken with painful sores from his head to his feet—so painful that he can only scratch himself with a shard of broken pottery.³ This terrible series of events prompted him to sit among the ashes for seven days... in complete silence. His pain was immeasurable. His loss was nearly complete. His will to keep living was gone. In fact, when he finally did open his mouth and speak, he cursed the day of his birth: *“Let the day perish on which I was born, and the night that said, ‘A man-child is conceived.’ Let that day be darkness! May God above not seek it, or light shine on it.”*⁴

If this were not tragic enough, the story continues with his three so-called friends, Eliphaz, Zophar, and Bildad, pummeling him again and again—telling him that this tragedy is all his

¹ Aesop’s Fables, Perry 525.

² Job 1:13-19.

³ Job 2:7-8.

⁴ Job 3:3-4.

fault. For 15 chapters, they go around and around, accusing him of sinning and bringing God's judgment upon himself. These disasters were all his fault, they claimed. He needs to make peace with God and repent of his sins, they tell him. Injury is being added to insult. Indeed, in the speech just before our passage, Bildad mocks Job, describing the wicked this way:

Their roots dry up beneath, and their branches wither above. Their memory perishes from the earth, and they have no name in the street. They are thrust from light into darkness, and driven out of the world. They have no offspring or descendant among their people, and no survivor where they used to live.⁵

It's difficult to imagine a more insensitive way of framing this to a man who just lost all 10 of his children. And so, it is no wonder that Job is moving from devastated to angry. Job begins his retort to Bildad like this: *"How long will you torment me, and break me in pieces with words?"*⁶ His frustration emerges. But it does not end with the friends. He blames God. He goes on to show that he does not believe God is dealing with him on the basis of simple theological laws such as 'the wicked always suffer' and 'the righteous always prosper'—the views his friends have been suggesting. Job has rejected this scheme—that this sin means this punishment, and that good deed means that blessing. He maintains that even if he has erred, his punishment does not fit the crime. The tragedy that has befallen him is out of proportion to what he deserves. And so, it is God's doing. He goes on: *"Know then that God has put me in the wrong, and closed his net around me. Even when I cry out, 'Violence!' I am not answered; I call aloud, but there is no justice."*⁷ His accusation is clear.

As do many, Job blames God. 'It isn't fair. I may deserve some punishment, but I do not deserve this. Therefore, God is vindictive. God is not only allowing horrible things to happen to good people, he's causing horrible things to happen to me.' To anyone who has suffered loss, it is a familiar thought. And we may feel shame for thinking it, embarrassed to have had the thought, as though it is impious to question God, let alone blame him. But nevertheless, it is understandable, relatable even. This is where we find Job: crying out in pain.

2. JOB'S PROCLAMATION

But with our reading, his poetic proclamation takes an abrupt turn. Job makes a surprising statement. He's basically been accusing God of unjustly tormenting him for 22 verses—for 15 chapters really—and then declares that he will be proven innocent.

O that my words were written down! O that they were inscribed in a book! O that with an iron pen and with lead they were engraved on a rock for ever! For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see [myself], and my eyes shall behold, and not another.

Make no mistake. We often come to this passage assuming that Job is being pious, that he is hopeful, that his statement about a Redeemer is optimistic. But I hope you can see now that Job

⁵ Job 18:16-19.

⁶ Job 19:2.

⁷ Job 19:6-7.

is not optimistic. He's expecting vindication. He's expecting an advocate to show up on his behalf—a Redeemer—and make his case before God. He shall have his day in court and God will be proven wrong for allowing all this tragedy in his life. That's what Job is hoping here. He's lashing out in anger and, if I may, adding even more insult to his injury.

And this is because, ironically of course, Job will not be vindicated. He will, instead, by the end of this book, repent in dust and ashes.⁸ You see, Job will see God and hear him—for four chapters God will speak to him out of the whirlwind—and Job will learn an important lesson. It does not matter how innocent and smart and right he thinks he is, compared to God, he is a lowly sinner and unable to fathom God's ways. And indeed, that is the lesson we all need to learn. Before God, we cannot plead our own case. Not one of us is righteous. Not one of us is innocent enough to cry out to God for vindication. Paul in his letter to the Roman church and quoting Psalm 14, makes this very point: *"There is no one who is righteous, not even one; there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God."*⁹ We cannot plead our own righteousness, for we all have sin, evil and rebellious thoughts and deeds, infecting our very being. If we are to hope for salvation, we need someone else to plead on our behalf.

Job spoke more wisely than he even realized. While he was looking for vindication, what he really needed was exactly what he asked for: redemption. He pinned his hope to a Redeemer.

In human terms, in the Old Testament, Redeemers did everything from purchasing their kinsmen out of slavery, purchasing back property, or even marrying the widow of his relative if the relative died without an heir. But interestingly, God is also frequently referred to as a Redeemer in the Old Testament. David refers to God as his Redeemer in several Psalms (like Psalm 19). And the term is especially important in the later chapters of Isaiah: *"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine."*¹⁰ And indeed, this is how the New Testament understand Jesus Christ. Ephesians 1, for example: *"In him [Jesus Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us."*¹¹

The situation that Job envisions is precisely the situation we see in our own lives. A perfect God that demands perfection, before whom we have no case, no hope of being vindicated on our merits. And yet, we have a Redeemer, also God, God the Son, who pleads his righteousness (and not ours). The Eucharistic Prayer, today, flips it around: *"in him we plead with confidence his sacrifice made once for all upon the cross."*¹² This, brothers and sisters, is our hope. We hope in redemption, not vindication. We do not need to be declared innocent—for we are not innocent. We need to be declared redeemed by the one who took the penalty for sin that we deserve.

That can be very difficult in our age—when what we want, always, is vindication. For example, it is often wrapped up in the phenomenon of self-realization and expressed in identity. I am

⁸ Job 42:6.

⁹ Rom 3:10-11.

¹⁰ Isa 43:1.

¹¹ Eph 1:7-8.

¹² The Archbishop's Council 2000, *Common Worship* (London: Church House Publishing, 2000), 197.

who I am—even if who I am is a sinner. We self-justify and look for affirmation. It's who I am, therefore, I am blameless. It is beyond my control, and so, I am innocent. And we, like Job, look for vindication. But it is not vindication that we need. It is redemption. We do not need to be declared innocent—for we are not innocent. We need to be declared redeemed by the one who took the penalty for sin that we deserve.

3. JOB'S POSSIBILITIES

And this should encourage us. In the face of God's certain and coming wrath—a much deserved wrath if we are honest about our sin—in whom shall we hope for redemption, if not God? In the face of the challenges of this life, in whom shall we hope for redemption if not God? In our day and age, it is too easy to rely on ourselves and our own understanding, to blame God rather than recognize that we cannot fathom his ways. We want vindication and not redemption. And so, we look for comfort in the proverbial wisdom of age. 'God never gives you more than you can handle.' And the even less vaguely biblical: 'God helps those who help themselves.' These are two sides of the same coin.

The first—'God never gives you more than you can handle'—is supposed to comfort us. We are supposed to believe that God is somehow up in heaven and looking down on us and saying: 'Well, Robert kind of ticked me off today, better start sending some bad stuff his direction...I wonder how much he can take? Let's send him just enough to annoy him, but not too much.' And of course, God will never send us more punishment than we can handle. It is very affirming isn't it? No matter how bad I have messed things up, no matter how big of a mess I have created, I can handle it. 'God will not give you more than you can handle.' Job disagrees. Of course God gives us more than we can handle. This is exactly why we need a Redeemer. This is why we need grace. When we face the much-deserved wrath of God, our only hope is that God, himself, in the form of Jesus Christ, has redeemed us. In his death and resurrection, he has cleansed us from sin and freed us from the need to earn his favour.

Then, there is the other side of the coin—'God helps those who help themselves.' Well, God seems to have struck me with some awful stuff, with some bad circumstances, better start picking up the pieces myself. I only have myself to help me. Really?

CONCLUSION

The beauty of all of this, of course, is that Job did not buy into these myths. He came face to face with a God he knew he could not satisfy on his own merit—even while he felt the pain of loss and cried out for vindication. But rather than relying on the empty joys of an affirmational culture, rather than trying to muscle his way through, he turned—however consciously—to the only place that he could possibly turn, the hope that God would not only be the one to destroy him, but also the one to redeem him. Jesus was not the Redeemer Job wanted, but he was the Redeemer Job needed. And he is the Redeemer that we need.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, thank you for your Son, that in his death and resurrection, you have redeemed us. Give us great confidence, not in our own efforts, but in the hope that comes from faith in your redemption. We pray this in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.