

**Job:
If Only There Were Some to Arbitrate**

Job 8–9

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How I wish we had an arbitrator to step in and let me get on with life. To break God's grip on me, to free me from this terror so I could breathe again. Then I'd speak up and state my case boldly. As things stand, there is no way I can do it.¹ Thus Eugene Peterson renders Job's anguish in Job 9:33-35.

We can almost feel Job's loneliness. His friends are proving of no help to him; worse: they are accusing him of sin and pleading for repentance. They have only song and they are singing it to death, as Calvin puts it. But things are even worse than that: God is proving to be hostile. Job can find no way into God's presence. He is cut off, alone, unable to make a case for himself. There is no one to sympathize. No one seems to care. Job is all alone in his grief and pain. Even if he could make his case, and God were to respond, "I do not believe He would give me a hearing," Job says (9:16).

Satan may not have managed to get Job to curse God as he had suggested (1:11; 2:5), but he has managed to deceive him. He has made God out to be a tyrant: uncaring, unmoved, heartless, callous.

There is nothing in the world quite like the feeling of being all alone, without a comforter to help, to understand. Ask the inmate in a prison cell... or the divorcee eating dinner in an apartment... or the widow who has just buried a loved one... or the single person who goes to bed and rises *alone*... or the misunderstood teenager whose weird clothes and body-piercing are a cry for attention in the loneliness of their existence. Job knows how they feel!

But there is another side to Job here—an argumentative, disputational side. Words like "dispute" (9:3, 14), and "argue" (9:14), and "plead" (9:15) reveal a side of Job that we haven't seen before. Gone, now is the depressed, mournful response of chapter 3. Grief has turned into anger, melancholy into resentment. God seems distant and unapproachable; Job's cries go unheard. Job is not yet willing to suggest that God is unjust; but there is no justice to which Job can have

¹ The Message: Job, by Eugene Peterson (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1996), 31.

recourse. And Job will not lie down and play dead! He is angry and he begins to lash out. Pushed into a corner by his friends' counsel, he lashes out like a wounded animal, biting and snarling because his own survival is at stake. His words are defensive; since no one else will speak for him, Job has to make his own case

Is God not just in all that he does?

It is Bildad who has provoked him to this response. Bildad is less circumspect than Eliphaz had been. His opening sentence, "Your words are a blustering wind" (8:2) have signaled his confrontational manner. But what has he said that has aggravated Job so much? Bildad has made one of those "When did you stop beating your wife?" questions!

"Does God Pervert justice?

Does the Almighty pervert what is right?" (Job 8:3)

Of course God doesn't pervert justice! But Bildad's point is that the reason why Job is suffering is because God's justice has been enforced. The implication is clear enough: Job is suffering because God has inflicted him with just punishment. To suggest otherwise is to impugn God's integrity. It never occurs to Bildad that there is any other explanation to Job's predicament. Suffering is always the result of God's punitive displeasure. The sting in Bildad's words has been the use of the conjunction, "if": "*if* you are pure and upright..." (8:6). Bildad isn't at all sure of Job's innocence, but he's granting the point that his sin may be less severe than that of his children. They, after all, had died! That, he assures Job, was God giving "them over to the penalty of their sin" (8:4). (Actually, there is no evidence at all that they had died as a judgment of God. True, Job was concerned about them, acting as priest and offering sacrifices on their behalf (1:5); but the text does not disapprove of these family gatherings, perhaps birthday celebrations.)

Everything is very simple for Bildad and his like: life is always explainable in terms of merit and reward. Sin is always punished and it is therefore possible to infer from suffering some unrighteous act that was its cause. Suffering is invariably a indication of transgression.

Bildad's home-spun philosophy is backed-up by two equally commonplace illustrations. One is that of a papyrus plant that dries up for lack of water (8:11-13). "Such is the destiny of all who forget God," he adds (8:13). The second is that of spider's web (8:14-19), something frail and impermanent—like job's confidence in his own argument of innocence. "Surely God does not reject a blameless man," he concludes (8:20). Like Eliphaz before him, Bildad, too, suspects that all these claims to Job's blamelessness are deeply suspect—even though Job will insist on it again (9:21; c.f. 4:6; 1:1,8; 2:3). Bildad is sowing seeds

of doubt as to Job's integrity and character. Job *must be* a guilty man.

Cash register justice! This is what Bildad and his friends have been espousing. It is the philosophy so eloquently delivered by Lucy to Charlie Brown that we considered in our previous study: *You get what you deserve, no more and no less*. There are no exceptions, no extenuating circumstances. *This is life!*

A room to scream in

According to one doctor, every hospital should have what he calls, "a screaming room"! "I loathe my very life," he cries (10:1). He wishes God would leave him alone and let him die.

Isn't it time to call it quits on my life?
Can't you let up, and let me smile just once
Before I die and am buried,
before I'm nailed into my coffin, sealed in the ground,
And banished for good to the land of the dead,
Blind in the final dark?²

And he's not going to get any justice from these friends:

"Even if I washed myself with soap
and my hands with washing soap,
you would plunge me into a slime pit..." (Job 9:30-31)

When bad things happen... who is the cause of it? Job would not have any other answer but that it is God who is behind all things. He had said to his wife much the same thing in chapter 2: "Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" (2:10). Like Job, Florence Nightingale once wrote in her diary for May 1851, "My life is more difficult than almost any other kind... Is this not God?"

Every now and then, Job tries the way of argumentation. He tries to reason his way out of despair. Chapter 9 contains one of those attempts. He resorts to the world of the courtroom.

If only God could be appealed to...

But supposing Job could summon God into the court room. Just suppose that Job could make God give an account of his actions, what then? "How can a mortal be righteous before God?..." he asks. (9:2). Don't misunderstand this question. Job is not asking a question about justification in the sense that Paul does in Galatians or Romans. No! Job's point is not so much, "How can I, a

² Peterson's rendition of Job 10:20-22.

sinner, be made right with God who is altogether holy?", but, "How can I, a righteous, but finite individual, be assured of justice before a God whose ways I can never fathom?"

Though one wished to dispute with him,
He could not answer him one time out of a thousand. (Job 9:3)

Job's point is that God does not need to account of Himself ("...Who can say to Him, 'What are you doing?'" 9:12), nor can He be brought under our control ("God does not restrain His anger..." 9:13). He is incomprehensible ("He performs wonders that cannot be fathomed..." 9:10).

Even if it were possible to bring God to account in a court of law, Job concludes that his inability to express himself would be his undoing, his own mouth would condemn him (9:20). But worse than that, Job does not think that God would listen: "I do not believe that He would give me a hearing" (9:16).

But now, the question haunts him again: "If it is not he, then who is it?" (9:24). Since Job is blameless (9:21) and God lies behind his trouble, life seems unfair. *God* seems unfair. That's Job's despair. His world-view is coming apart. Life makes no sense. He cannot get a handle on his world. The suspicion is growing that God's providence is inherently unjust.

Job feels trapped. He can see no way of escape. There is a hopelessness about his condition that throws him into the darkest despair. He is a pitiful sight at the end of chapter 10. Only the merciless can fail to be touched by his plight.

"If only there someone to arbitrate between us..." Job laments (9:33).

A bigger picture

What Job cannot see is the real battle that is taking place. He is ignorant of Satan's devices and hence has drawn the conclusion that God is his enemy, when in truth it is Satan. Job is caught up in a bigger struggle than he can see.

It is not true that God does not listen to his cries. Nor is true that God does not care about his plight. He does. Later, much later in the story of redemption, God reveals His love for his children in sending His Son "in the likeness of sinful flesh..." (Rom. 8:3). In the strangling grip of Golgotha, Jesus faced the despairing dilemma of an unfolding providence from which he longed to be free. He was to experience the dereliction of loneliness in a way that no one else had. In the cry of abandonment, when little made sense, when blamelessness met suffering to a degree unparalleled, Jesus was to become for us a sympathizing high priest (Matt. 27:45-46; Heb. 4:15).

Drawing from this aspect of the Savior's sympathizing role, Isaac Watts could write the hymn that says what Job would have longed to have known:

With joy we meditate the grace
Of our High Priest above;
His heart is made of tenderness,
And overflows with love.

Touched with a sympathy within,
He knows our feeble frame;
He knows what sore temptations mean,
For He has felt the same.

But spotless, innocent, and pure,
The great Redeemer stood,
While Satan's fiery darts He bore,
And did resist to blood.

He in the days of feeble flesh
Poured out His cries and tears;
And, though exalted, feels afresh
What every member bears.

He'll never quench the smoking flax,
But raise it to a flame;
The bruised reed He never breaks,
Nor scorns the meanest name.

Then let our humble faith address
His mercy and His power:
We shall obtain delivering grace
In the distressing hour. — *Isaac Watts (1674-1748)*

Not knowing it, Job sinks back into the engulfing darkness of despair.

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