

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

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“Into the Fire”

*The second in a four-part series entitled,
Community that Enables a Journey*

Job 3–37

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Last we left Job, he was sitting in the ashes, life in shambles but with his integrity and his theology all intact. When trouble hit, Job had anchored himself to a few bottom, bumper sticker truths like, **“The Lord gives and the Lord takes away.”** These were verses he’d learned in Vacation Bible School, **“Naked I came into this world and naked I will depart.”**

For two chapters Job stays all buttoned up in his Sunday best.
He never gets mad and starts cursing God as his wife suggested,
Nor does he devalue life... his life...

He keeps affirming God’s right to run the world... however.

On the outside Job is a mess. His house and farm have been leveled. His kids and servants are gone. His body is covered with leprosy. His wife is... “nagging.” But inside, Job is together. His interior life is structured... it’s solid... at least for a few days.

In the ashes Job gets quiet. He stops quoting scripture and he doesn’t say a word. For seven days he’s silent. He has three friends who show up. From a distance they see him sitting there in sackcloth and they walk up to him weeping and they tear their clothes and just plop down next to their friend for seven days.

For seven days, these friends show amazing restraint. No one offers to go make a casserole.

No one tries to practice some active listening, **“Job, what I hear you saying is... well... nothing really. What does your silence mean, Job?”**

No one tries to take his mind off of things with chitchat. **“I noticed the paper advertised a sale on camels... maybe when your insurance check comes in we can all go down to the camel lot and pick out a few new ones... that’s just what you need.”**

No one suggests that he go take a warm bath or see the doctor about his skin condition. Just silence... **“because they see how great his suffering is.”** Nothing but silence.

His hope was that God would show up and have something to say... some word of explanation... or at least some comfort of some kind. There’d be some amazing sense of divine presence that made the horrible pain bearable.

Job waits in silence and... Job gets nothing. No conversation or comfort... no still small voice whispering sweet answers in his ear... no meaning... nothing... nada.

All he has is his suffering... and pain has a way of pounding at us, doesn’t it. During his seven days of silence, he waits patiently in God’s outer office, knees together, hands in his lap. He keeps repeating his truths... from time to time when the loss hurts too much he remembers his bumper stickers.

“Naked I came in... naked I go out.” He’d begin to feel some despair and he’d say it like a mantra, **“The Lord gives and the Lord takes away.” “The Lord gives and the Lord takes away.” “The Lord gives and the Lord takes away.”**

And it helped some... but every time a little less. His ocean of suffering was beginning to take its toll on the foundations of his inner world. Waves of pain and loss were crashing into the structures of his life and they were starting to crumble.

And then he began to hear another voice. **“This makes no sense and you know good and well it isn’t just.”** It got a little louder, **“This doesn’t seem like the God you know, does it.”**

And he would ignore that for a while but not for long, **“You did nothing to deserve this kind of life and it doesn’t reflect well on God or God’s world for something like this to happen.”**

“Maybe God is unjust.”

“Maybe God doesn’t care.”

“Maybe God can’t help.”

“Maybe God’s not there.”

Several days into the silence, these lines replaced the ones from his past and his religious tradition... and finally Job got up and went over to his cart and ripped all the bumper stickers off... and he got one of those that said, **“Life sucks, then you die.”** And put that on his bumper to the horror of his friends.

“I wish I’d never been born.”

“Life’s a bad joke and so am I.”

“What’s the point?”

Job’s friends start giving one another oxygen and smelling salts and... after they recover from their shock and stop their hyperventilation, they start venting on Job. And as we heard earlier, they go at him and back and forth with him for 34 chapters.

And the more they talk with Job, the more “out there” he gets.

“God mocks the innocent” he shouts. 8:23

“God gnashes His teeth at me.” 16:9

“He carries out decrees against me.” 23:14

“I’d love to talk with him about all this but he’s nowhere to be found, that’s the only sure thing... God is absent.”

You can just see his friends... the bolder and more blasphemous Job gets, the further away they stand. They’re looking up and listening for thunder... and standing at a safe distance while they preach.

And as you heard earlier, their collective sermon is basically this, **“God doesn’t punish good people, so Job you ought to quit this charade, confess your sin, and then we can all get up out of these blasted ashes.”**

They repeat this again and again. **“When the going gets tough... the sinful better fess up.”**

They even invite Job to look on the bright side of it all. **“God will use this in your life to make you a better person and bless you. You’ll have lemonade from all these lemons, Job, if you’ll just admit to the skeleton we all know is lurking in your closet.”**

On and on and on it goes. And the monotony of it is important. (You heard just a sampling of it earlier.) It’s critical to a healthy theology of the Old Testament to see this as exhaustive and exhausting. Because, this was the orthodox thinking of the day.

“God always gets His man, especially if His man is sinful.” Real sinners were easy to spot. They had no health, no wealth, no children, no camels... all they had was an unenviable life.

But right here in the middle of the Old Testament, there is a story and for 34 chapters of that story we hear that nonsense refuted again and again.

The writer doesn’t sum it up and say, **“They fought for several days about theological matters like sin and God’s sovereignty... basically disagreeing over the problem of pain.”** No, we have to read these nauseating sermonettes by his friends. You can imagine them... you’ve heard them.

“Now, Brother Job... we know what the scriptures say and they say you’re guilty, guilty, Brother Job. I’m going to ask you to bow your head... and repeat this simple prayer after me.”

“Job, your suffering is, first of all, a By-Product. Secondly, your suffering is, a Blockade, and thirdly, it can be a Blessing. Job, are you writing this down? It’s a By-product, a Blockade, and a Blessing.”

On it goes, each sermon, each voice, pleading the case of a worldview that will no longer suffice for Job. He has a comeback for everything they say. And as the reader, you find yourself wanting to stand up and scream, **“Alright, alright... suffering just is... sometimes it doesn’t have anything to do with anything. The innocent suffer and God lets it happen. Suffering and sin aren’t necessarily related.”**

It’s a theology that dies hard in spite of this amazing story right here front and center in our Bible... and you’ve seen that, haven’t you? **“Why me... why us... what does this mean?”**

It dies hard... but Job insists that it die... he will not quit. This story stomps all over that understanding of the world.

Job demands something from God and from this world that fits and that is large enough for his experience. His life and his pain can no longer be placated by something simple enough to go on a bumper. It's not enough so...

Job jumps into the fire in chapters 3-37. He takes on the truths he'd been taught and he takes on his own worldview and that of his friends. Ultimately, he is taking on God.

In one of his books, Nikos Kazantzakis tells of a summer he spent as a older adolescent in a monastery in the mountains... and of a conversation with a well-known and loved, 80-year-old monk.

“Do you still wrestle with the devil?”

“No, I'm old and tired and so is he?

“So... your life must be easy now.”

**“No... it's much harder now...
now I wrestle with God.”**

In this part of Job's journey he wrestles with God... and it's a wrestling match not unfamiliar to most of us. The system of meaning that Job had lived with there in Uz had collapsed.

The container... cracked... it always will.

At first Job keeps all the hatches battened down, but he eventually can't keep this up forever

And in this part of the journey... appropriately... he wrestles with God. It's the only way to a faith that will suffice for the second half of life.

Where we stand up in the face of life and have the honesty and integrity to demand that it mean more. And usually that means letting go of at least some truths that may have served us well for a time. That's what Job does here.

The summer prior to my Senior year in high school there was a fine young man who was about to start his sophomore year sitting in his front yard.

I'd just gotten to know Tom Bruton through our Fellowship of Christian Athletes chapter. Tom was sitting in his front yard waiting for a friend to pick him up and another student, who was using drugs at the time, lost control of his car... ran up into the lawn and pinned Tom down. He died there holding his mother's hand.

The news reached us at our FCA conference in Colorado and we sat down in the ashes in grief. And our counselors and adult sponsors, many of them professional athletes gathered around us to offer comfort and I remember the leader saying to us all, **“We have to understand that this was God's will.”**

That helped for a while. I didn't make it seven days, though... more like 7 hours. “That was ludicrous,” I thought. **“God didn't cause that... but God sure let it happen.”**

And I felt my worldview begin to unravel. It was like someone was pulling a thread on a sweater and they pulled faster and faster... and I asked more and more questions... and felt less and less satisfied with the answers of my church... until finally I pointed at God and said, **“Make sense of this.”** I prayed, **“Make sense of my life, please.”**

What do you think I heard? Like Job... mostly it was silence. Asking the questions is hard enough... not hearing quick answers is even harder. I spent years waiting for the answers.

Do you know what I'm talking about? Where the truths that once worked for you aren't enough? And you can't pretend any more... you have to know. You have to be honest and real.

Life... God... escorts us to that... Something will happen... something difficult. This usually involves suffering, internally or externally or both.

Something happens... you turn 19 and start reading the paper and you see the suffering of the innocent... and the container cracks.

A marriage ends or a loved-one dies... The container breaks.

You'll meet a nonchurch-going, nonbeliever who is more Christ-like than most of the deacons you've known and you won't know where to put that reality... because it won't fit in your container.

Or maybe something inside you just says... **“It's time to leave home... and you've got to let go of some things to do it.”**

Those moments will come and come for us all and when they do... Job has much to teach us.

For instance... that this is going to take some time (34 chapters remember... it's the longest conversation in scripture). And it'll teach us that this isn't going to be resolved at the level of the intellect. We can't "fix" this doctrinally... theologically. Job's friends reasoned with him... they argued with him... They made numerous appeals to The Tradition. We will not resolve this at that level.

Something else is taking place and pain is the means of it. Richard Rohr says that **"success has almost nothing to teach you after age thirty."** Wisdom comes to us in a different way and it isn't going to be nice and neat... you won't get what you need in a seminar.

The story gives us hope... but it doesn't come on our terms... and we can't get to the hopeful end without facing this dark night. We've got to get into the fire.

And so I want to ask, **"What kind of community must we be to allow people to be in the fire?"**

Because, that's what it takes to make this journey. Job is with us today... and if you don't know it, you need to. There people here I serious pain...there are people here longing for peace...there are plenty of us here with way more questions than answers... and I'm wondering if they can ask them here.

Or will it make you nervous?

Will we get anxious and rush to prop up our truths?

Can we create and value a container (like we said we must last week) and let it crack all at the same time? That's tough... it's paradoxically difficult.

To nail things down and when life comes undone for someone... not to make them feel that there is no place here for their pain.

"Um... you can hurt and not know for a few weeks... maybe even ja month or so... but sooner or later you're going to have to say 'I believe' or at least keep all those doubts to yourself."

A healthy community is not anxious... A community that enables a journey does not try to answer for God or prop God up.

Job needed someone who was willing to say, **"I've had those feelings and asked those very questions."**

Job needed people who didn't chit-chat about the Divine as if He lived in their back-pocket. **"The Lord this and the Lord that..."** He needed folks not to make him feel like there was a spiritual party going on and he wasn't invited. **"Isn't the Lord wonderful?" "Prayer changes everything, doesn't it!"**

That, by the way, is what it means to "take the Lord's name in vain." How we talk about "the answers" is as important as "the answers" themselves. If you've been healed along the way—do what Jesus said to do and don't tell any one. Not unless God tells you to. Because I guarantee you there'll be someone next to you whose loved one wasn't healed...even though they prayed like crazy.

What will Job hear in our midst? Remember, Job's friends were in big trouble with God at the end of this story. Job needed something different.

Job needed real people on a real journey who were open to seeing life but also committed to finding God... not just cynics for cynicism's sake but folks who are really searching.

And he needed to be around some folks who had found God but weren't panicked that Job wouldn't over night. Job needed the Church... an honest to God... and honest to life... community of faith.

O God... let us be that... Make us both confident of your truth and humble in the face of your mystery. Help us to know how to proclaim the good news while being honest about the bad news. Make us loving and wise and true... like your Son in whose name we pray. Amen.

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