

The Age-Old Question

Sometimes in my childhood, when I was asking all those annoying “whys,” an uncomfortable adult probably told me children should be seen and



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not heard! So it's not surprising, as an adult – possibly as have you – that I wonder how the book called Job ever get into the Hebrew scriptures?

Job asks a lot of questions, endures the shallow judgments and worn platitudes of his contemporaries – and ends up discovering that God has more surprises and blessings than we can begin to understand! Who among us has not wondered about this business of life, death, and life beyond our knowing? “If mortals die, will they live again?” (v. 14).

Job intrigues me, challenges me, and makes me glad that beyond my knowledge and the countless words of philosophers and theologians there is a God who says “I am here now and forever.” This complex book is dark wisdom that outshines all the challenging religious laws, tragic stories of Israel's failures, and points to the ultimate grace of God we never fully see until the advent of Jesus. Scholars argue about Job being a real person or this being a carefully crafted story about God, who confronts our mutated versions of faith and simplistic interpretations about good and evil in life. Whoever the author, I thank him/her for prodding me to allow God to be God when life is neither fair nor rational.

We like our stories about real life to be straightforward: the good live and the bad die. Enter Job. In the opening chapter, Job is living the good life he deserves, but in the heavenly realm God and his angels are gathered when a strange character called Satan offers a challenge to God: “So your man Job is blameless and lives the good life, but have you considered he wouldn't

be good if his rewards were not so generous and his life so charmed?” (1:9-11) God says Satan can take his best shot and the struggle of life begins.

When Job was written the Hebrews had a very limited concept of life after death as a shadowy existence called Sheol, not a heaven of light and beauty where God's people would live in his presence. But Job's voice hints that he is not satisfied with a simplistic world of punishment and rewards or an “after world” where God seems strangely absent.

Sometimes pain opens our mind to uncommon and unexplained possibilities. Job is so much more than a religious punching bag: he sees promise in a dead tree and its “roots that will not cease” and the “scent of water” that causes a dead stump to “bud and put forth branches” (v. 8). In the deepest moment of his pain Job continues to see God: “Oh that you would hide me in Sheol, that you would conceal me until your wrath is past, that you would appoint me a set time, and remember me!” (v. 13).

Read this against the unsettling words of Job's friends(?), Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, as they repeat the harsh interpretation of their world: Job was a guilty sinner receiving what he deserved. We still confront the easy theology of good works getting the prize and sinful behavior getting you-know-what. Class dismissed.

But there is Job saying “Wait a minute. There is more to God than that!” Many scholars think that Job got into the Old Testament precisely because it confronted such a shallow perspective on life, death, and God. Consider how God described Job to Satan at the beginning of this story: “Have you considered my servant Job? For there is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, fearing (respecting) God and turning away from evil?” (v. 8).

This is not a book about sin and

punishment, but about the yearning heart of a world that creates myths about life, eternity, and what it means to be human. Job is the suffering man who dares to dismiss concocted philosophy and hope in the God who is the origin and reason behind all that is in this conflicted world and the mysteries of the realm of death. Hear Job! He says to God: “Oh that you would hide me in Sheol ... until your wrath is past ... appoint me a set time, and remember me!” Is there real life beyond death? I will wait as long as it takes because I am the work of your hands and will answer you” (vv.14-15, my paraphrase).

“Hope” characterizes the book of Job. God's revelation is progressive, much like the maturing of a human life from infancy to old age. Without the New Testament much of the Old Testament would seem little more than quaint religious writings to our modern world. To witness Job's tragic loss of everything, including his children, as well as his enduring of his friends' accusations and harsh explanations cautions us that we do not have all the answers either. We are witness to massive tragedy and horrendous human cruelties in our day, but we have the witness of God's love and grace in human flesh: Jesus the Christ, Son of the living God, Savior of all who will call on him!

Tragedy is part of this physical world. We do not know all the answers. All of our clever interpretations, many too much like those of Job's friends, cannot begin to define the Eternal God. Bad things happen. Life goes on. But in the heart of God there is a promise that becomes ours when we simply believe. In the end Job answered the Lord: “I know that thou canst do all things, and that no purpose of thine can be thwarted” (Job 42:2). When all is said and done, there is God offering us a life that no person or circumstance can take away.