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Making Sense of Life's Storms: A How to Guide by Job

The Book of Job calls us to join one another in the dust of human life and wait for the Lord together.

“Look at me and be appalled, and lay your hand upon your mouth.” Job 21:5

I have devoted the better part of the last ten years of my career to studying the Book of Job. Saint Jerome once compared interpreting Job to trying to catch an eel barehanded, saying, “If you close your hand to hold an eel or a little muraena, the more you squeeze it the sooner it escapes.” Job is difficult to grasp.

I see in this enigmatic text an abundance of wisdom for the craft and theological practice of preaching. But over the course of countless conversations with fellow scholars, students, preachers, and laypeople (and heck, even chatty Uber drivers), I have come to realize that there is a multiplicity to Job—he is not simply one thing, one message, one paradigm, or one story. He takes on multiple roles in Christian imagination as a longsuffering worshipper, a patient sufferer, a martyr, a prophetic harbinger of Christ, a test of endurance, a penitent sinner, and a vindicated hero.

Throughout Christian history, one could add to this list a valiant soldier who withstands the attacks of Satan (see Gregory the Great's *Moralia in Job*), and an afflicted saint who intercedes on behalf of those stricken by the plague (see the Church of Saint Job in Venice, erected in the 15th century following a bout of the plague in the region).

But the one question that comes to mind when I hear people talk about the Job of their imaginations is, “Are we even reading the same text?”

I have found that oftentimes, the answer is simply, “No, not quite.” Not that reading the same text would ever produce a uniformity of interpretation—but it would certainly reduce the range of variation.

Overview of the Book of Job

The truth is the average person has not read *all* of Job. Job is a long, painstaking text. Its forty-two chapters can be broken into three broad sections: a narrative prologue (Job 1-2); the poetic discourse (Job 3-42:6), which includes the “Wisdom Hymn” of Job 28 and some brief narrative scaffolding around some of the speeches; and the narrative epilogue (Job 42:7-17).

Scholars have observed that within the text, there seems to exist two Jobs: the Job of the narrative prologue and epilogue, and the Job of the poetry. The Job that we meet in the first two chapters could in some sense be described as patient—though one would have to travel all the way over to the Epistle of James to find a biblical passage that overtly attributes patience to Job.

More important for our understanding of Job, he is described in the prologue as “blameless and upright” (Job 1:1), a point we will return to later. When I hear preachers elevate Job as the paradigm of patient suffering, I immediately wonder if the preacher made it past Job 2:13. When I hear preachers describe the story of Job as a test of endurance or of a vindicated sufferer, I know that they also read Job 42:7-17. But if they fail to describe Job as, first and foremost, a man coming unraveled in grief, I wonder if they missed out on over three dozen chapters in between.

Job 2:13 concludes with Job’s so-called friends—Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar—sitting with him on the ground in complete silence for seven days and seven nights, “for they saw that his suffering was very great.” Seven days and seven nights may not seem like a terribly long time. But anyone who has ever experienced horrific loss knows that time has a way of collapsing in grief. One hour can feel like a whole week. One day without the one(s) you have lost can feel like an eternity. Seven days and seven nights is certainly a long enough span of time for suffering to do its work in Job.

Job 3 initiates the poetic center of the book, breaking the silence with Job’s anguished lament: a curse of the day he was born. It is here that we begin to encounter a very different portrait of Job. No longer patient, no longer longsuffering, no longer worshipful. He wishes he was dead; he wishes he had never been born. His laments continue throughout the cycles of discourse with his friends.

In some brief moments, he ventures toward hope, only to be snatched back into the clenches of his despair. He pleads with God to come and make things right, but God remains silent for chapters on end. He begs his friends to believe him, to bear witness to his suffering.

Job longs for someone to see and hear his wounds, because there in his wounds is an important truth: the suffering we experience in this life exerts a chaotic, baffling, theology-defying force upon us. We wish only that we not endure it alone. We, like Job, hope that God sees us and cares; we, like Job, hope that our friends and loved ones will listen and abide with us.

Thankfully, God does finally meet with Job through a whirlwind in Job 38-41. But the divine speeches do little to assuage our concerns. We want God to answer, “Why do the innocent suffer unjustly?” and instead God essentially says, “Look at everything I made! Isn’t it awesome?”

At one point in my career, I speculated that simply being in the presence of God would be enough to heal Job’s wounds. I proudly ventured this idea while discussing Job with a world-leading Old Testament scholar at Duke, who patiently endured my theory while stirring her tea. When I finished speaking, she quietly asked, “Do you *really* find the ending of Job *satisfying*? Do you *really* think the whirlwind encounter could fix the fact that Job’s children are dead?”

The truth is, I craved a *deus ex machina* where there wasn’t one. For my own existential reasons, I wanted to believe that the Book of Job finds a perfect resolution. But the Book of Job is not a theodicy; it offers no justification for Job’s undue suffering, and it does little to defend God’s actions.

Instead, we are left with three outcomes in the end of Job: (1) God scolds the friends in Job 42:7 because they had “not spoken truly” of God as Job had; (2) Job is comforted by his loved ones in Job 42:11, indicating that he is still wounded, but now surrounded by those who are ready to care for him; and (3) Job’s life continues, with the blessings of more children and expanding property, described in Job 42:10-17.

An Interpretation for Preachers

One way we could interpret the Book of Job is that this is a story of a man whose life is torn apart and, as a result, must find his way to a new understanding of God. One could argue that the story of Job is chiefly one of deconstruction and reconstruction: Job's beliefs about God prior to his suffering no longer make sense in the midst of his suffering. His perception of God has to change and grow to accommodate his new reality.

This is why Job finds himself in contention with his friends: they maintain a theological perspective that insists that bad things happen because of sin or human error. In their minds, God rewards the righteous, and punishes the wicked. Thus, Job surely deserved his suffering, because God would never allow such calamity to befall a truly righteous person.

However, we as the readers know better than the friends, because we were privy to the courtroom conversation in Job 1-2. In fact, we witness the moment in Job 2:3 where God admits that he destroyed Job "for no reason." Job is telling the truth when he declares again and again that he has not deserved his suffering. His testimony issues a formidable challenge against the theological assumptions of his community. The question is, will the friends receive his testimony?

At multiple points in the poetic discourse, Job beseeches his friends to see him and hear him. But they are so dedicated to maintaining their theological positions, that they resist Job's wounds. They allow their God-talk to continue unchallenged.

I see in this aspect of the story an important lesson for those of us who have devoted our lives to God-talk. In Job 21:5, Job urges, "Look at me and be appalled, and lay your hand upon your mouth." In other words, "Be so moved by my suffering that your words would be interrupted." Stop talking, and pay attention. Cease your defense of God, halt your apologetics, reconsider your position, lest you be on the receiving end of God's rebuke (42:7), "My wrath is kindled against you, for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant has."

A Sermon Series on the Book of Job

One possibility for a series would be to focus on the theme of integrity. In the beginning of the book, Job is repeatedly described by the narrator and God as "blameless and upright" (Job 1:1; 1:8; 2:3). The word that we translate as "blameless" is the Hebrew word *tam*, which means perfect, complete, or one of integrity. The word carries a connotation of wholeness—that for one to be of integrity is for one to be perfectly whole.

Thus, in the beginning of Job, we are introduced to our exceptional, upright, and blameless protagonist. He is wealthy, prosperous, and pious. He fears God, and cares for his family. If you operate under the worldview that prosperity is an indicator of righteousness, then Job is the very image of *tam*. He *appears* whole and perfect. His integrity *appears* to be intact. The question posed by the Accuser in 1:9-11 is whether Job's integrity would remain if he lost everything. Does Job only fear God because his life is easy and wonderful? Would Job continue to be upright if he had no good reason to be?

When Job loses nearly everything, he experiences an image problem: though he has not sinned or deserved his suffering, he no longer *appears* as one of integrity; he no longer appears *tam*. His life is broken into pieces, his flesh is rotting. His property has been destroyed; his children have been killed. Job sits in the broken pieces of his life, and must find a way to tell the truth, that things are not as they seem.

When his friends look at his brokenness, they cannot see a whole person. When they encounter his laments, his anger, and disorientation, they cannot see a person of integrity.

Yet, despite everything, Job holds fast to the truth of his life. In 9:20-22, he reaffirms his innocence, and even reclaims *tam* for himself. Though he appears broken, he maintains that he is whole. Though his friends jump to conclusions and misjudge him, he maintains his integrity.

Ultimately, Job's integrity is deemed right. He is said to have spoken truly of God. But what did he say of God that was true? He accused God of being absent, careless, and violent. He described God as a wild animal and an enemy warrior. He shook a fist at God demanding a direct confrontation. He unraveled many of his prior beliefs and cast aside the theological formulations of his friends.

And yet, something about this was deemed honest. Something about Job's lament can be characterized as true.

Apparently, integrity is the one thing that cannot be stripped from Job. His unyielding dedication to speaking the truth of his suffering is ultimately praised in the end of the book. Though the friends were not willing to hear it, though they could not see it through the wreckage of his life, Job's devotion to telling the truth becomes his lifeline, even when it seems God is absent or silent.

A sermon series on integrity in Job could begin with the prologue, opening the ways in which we associate the appearance of divine favor with the state of a person's character or faith. With the prologue, we could explore the Book of Job as a mirror to our own society. Job is too extraordinary to be an "everyman" trope; but there is a sense in which readers could wonder, *If all of this could happen to Job, then it could really happen to anyone.*

The prologue opens this question: why do we fear God? And would we still be people of integrity if everything came crashing down? Would we dare to pursue the truth about God when the foundations of our faith are shaken?

From the prologue, we dive into lament. This, too, is a matter of integrity. A sermon on the integrity of lament may help congregants to step into honest expressions of grief, loss, and anger.

With Job, we find permission to articulate our confusion, sorrow, and disillusionment. Where God has surprised us with perceived absence or disregard, we are invited to speak truly. Not only is God not threatened by this (remember, God created the constellations, the wild animals, the Leviathan, and the Behemoth—just as God made you, according to the whirlwind speeches), it seems God counts it as truth-telling, an expression of integrity.

As the cycles of conversation escalate between Job and his friends, the preacher may develop a sermon or two that engage the conflict of theological imaginations in the presence of suffering. What do we do when another person's testimony threatens our own beliefs about God? How should we respond when a person's wounds violate our own sense of cosmic order? Prioritizing integrity in such moments does not mean that we contend for our doctrine, or chasten the sufferer. Rather, prioritizing integrity means that we seek the truth with the sufferer, adjusting our perspective when necessary.

The final sermon in this series would conclude with the epilogue, asking hard questions about the implications of Job's restoration. Like the scholar I mentioned earlier, we wonder, "Does this ending really satisfy us?"

Once we have chosen to see the whole, honest, integrity of Job in his brokenness, we emerge with a different perspective on blessings. Blessings are not an indicator of a person's character or moral standing. And no gifts from the divine can repair the harm we experience in this life (for instance, new children cannot replace the children Job lost).

Rather, life continues to move along and grow around our grief. Being a person of integrity means that, even as life carries forward, we do not have to brush aside our wounds. Rather, we can find ourselves at the table with our siblings in Christ, receiving care and comfort for as long as needed.

A sermon series on integrity might also pick up the theme of courtroom language found throughout the book. Job does not promote the truth of his life in a vacuum; rather, he does so in the presence of those who seek to refute him. Further, he offers his testimony to God, whom he hopes is a fair judge. At times, he is not so sure if God will adjudicate fairly. Perhaps God is not just, he wonders. But in the end, despite the questionable choices made in the heavenly court in the prologue, and despite divine silence for dozens of chapters, God does affirm justice. And this justice emerges in direct relation to Job's honesty.

A series on the integrity of Job in the midst of suffering might look like this:

TITLE: Good for Nothing?

BIG IDEA: Do we fear God for nothing? This is the question posed by the accuser in Job 1:9. In his book, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, Gustavo Gutiérrez argues that this is the central theme of the book: the matter of "disinterested religion." Do the people of God only fear God in hopes of retrieving divine favor and blessing? Or do we fear God for some other reason? Would we still be people of integrity even if the good things of our lives were torn from us?

SCRIPTURE: Job 1:1-2:9, with an emphasis on Job 1:9-11 and Job 2:3-6

TITLE: An Honest Cry

BIG IDEA: Job offers some of the most poignant, gut-wrenching, honest laments in all of scripture. Though these laments might make some of us uncomfortable, they remind us that lament, too, is a matter of integrity. Job is credited for "speaking truly" in the end.

SCRIPTURE: Job 3:1-26; 16:6-22

TITLE: If You Don't Have Anything Nice to Say ...

BIG IDEA: This sermon focuses on the dialogue between Job and his so-called friends. We as readers know that Job is telling the truth when he argues that he has not deserved his suffering. Thus, we can quickly discern the error of his friends, who repeatedly talk past Job's wounds in order to promote their own ideas about Job's suffering. But are we able to recognize this behavior in ourselves? How often do we judge others based on the quality of their lives? Would we welcome the truth of another's life to challenge our own assumptions?

SCRIPTURE: Job 16:1-5; 21:1-5

TITLE: Everything We Thought We Knew

BIG IDEA: Job's friends promote what some would refer to as a Deuteronomistic perspective: if you obey God's commands, you will be blessed; if you violate God's commands, you will be disciplined. According to this worldview, Job's suffering can only mean one thing, that he has sinned. Further, Job bears the marks of a sinner. He has been afflicted from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head (cf. Deut. 28:35). Job's story challenges everything we

thought we knew about divine blessing. It offers a mighty blow against the contemporary prosperity gospel, reminding us that our suffering does not indicate divine disfavor, and the good things in our life do not indicate divine approval. In a world where God sends rain to fall on the righteous and the unrighteous (Matt. 5:45), integrity demands a deeper perspective.

SCRIPTURE: Job 4:7-9 (words of Eliphaz); 11:1-6 (words of Zophar); 18:5-21 (words of Bildad); Job 9:20-24 (words of Job)

TITLE: The Afterlife of Loss

BIG IDEA: At first glance, it would appear that following the divine speeches, God restores everything that was torn from Job, and then some. But those who have suffered through the loss of a child know that the ending of Job is far from a “happily ever after.” Job’s grief has an afterlife, made apparent in the detail, “they showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the Lord had brought upon him” in Job 42:11. There are a couple of important distinctions to be made between the Job of the first forty-one chapters and the Job of the epilogue; but perhaps the most important difference is that, where Job’s friends could not receive the truth of his life before, he is now surrounded by people who can and will bear witness to the truth. His friends and family are sympathetic comforters. Maybe one key to Job’s long life after loss is the presence of a community of integrity to sustain him. They have all become people who can bear the truth together.

SCRIPTURE: Job 42:7-17

An Ecclesial Call

The call for the church reading Job is twofold: (1) to be faithful witnesses, people of integrity, devoted to seeing and hearing Job’s wounds, and (2) to do likewise with the Jobs that surround us. Rather than mistaking the ravages of life for indicators of moral failure, we are called to see the whole person before us—the one to whom life has happened, and the one who now needs a friend and witness. God may seem distant or silent for chapters on end, but in the meantime, we can render a holy presence for one another. We can join one another in the dust of human life and wait for the Lord together.

Amy McLaughlin-Sheasby

Topics: [Dust](#); [Faithful](#); [Faithfulness](#); [Friend](#); [Honesty](#); [Integrity](#); [Job](#); [Loss](#); [Neighbor](#); [Presence](#); [Silence](#); [Suffering](#)

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