

Does Job Fear God for Naught?

Job 1:6-12, 20-22; 2:1-10

Jan. 24, 2021

A great scholar of the OT prophets, the great Rabbi Abraham Heschel once described God this way:

God is not nice. God is not an uncle. God is an earthquake.” ~ Abraham Heschel.

Picture yourself as an OT pilgrim part of the OT people of God. Picture yourself at the base of Mt. Sinai. What would you have seen? This is how Moses describes the scene:

Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the Lord had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. (Ex. 19:18-19)

As an OT pilgrim at the foot of the mountain, what would have been your response to God?

“Umm, Moses, I wonder whether we can perhaps we can tone down the theatrics a bit? I wonder whether you can tell God that we long to put him in a small box and release him only when it is convenient for our lives?”

At the foot of Mt. Sinai, there was none of that. The pilgrim response to God is recorded in the very next chapter:

Now when the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off, and said to Moses: You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die” (Exod. 20:18-19)

OT Testament saints trembled again and again – they trembled at the nature of God. Did they *understand* and *live* what Abraham Heschel wrote? “God is not nice. God is not your uncle. God is an earthquake.”

Two times in the prologue of the Book of Job – chapters 1 & 2 – God asks the most perplexing and terrifying question in the Bible: “*Have you considered my servant Job?*”

And the question lands as an earthquake in the lap and in the life of Job. God initiates the suffering in the life of Job. There is no getting around it. Heschel’s sentiment is spot on and no more true than in the book of Job. *God is not outwardly nice with this question. God is not Job’s uncle. God is an earthquake for Job.*

When I enter the pages of the Old Testament, here’s what I learn and here’s what I love:

I learn on the pages of the OT that I have most likely (most definitely!) done one thing with the nature and character of God: I have domesticated God. I stand guilty! Completely guilty in my domestication of God. I do not want the earthquake! I want to look out upon my life with God as a smooth, serene lake. I picture God blessing me with a cabin and a rocking chair where I can curl up with a blanket.

Yet, I learn that in my domestication of God, one thing suffers above all else as a consequence and it's this:

*The ultimate desires of my heart for **first things** get stifled, get tamped down, get smothered, and even asphyxiated.*

It's **as if** God has given me – and each one of you – burning coals of desires deep in our hearts and deep in our souls for First Things. First Things is our God-given desire for union and communion with God himself! Yet as we domesticate God – as we fail to live into the truth that *God is an earthquake* – we essentially throw a big bucket of cold water on these burning coals of ultimate desires.

My ultimate desire for first things – for union & communion with God – gets watered down. In my own life, I become content with second things. I order my prayers towards receiving God's *blessings*. I order my life towards receiving God's *gifts*. I become content with "**Second Things**" to the point of saying to God:

"God, you owe me! Look what I've done for You. Haven't I been faithful to you? I do everything I'm supposed to do."

The domestication of God leads to a suppression of my ultimate (First Thing) desires.

When someone asks you about your deepest dreams...Where does your mind go? Does your mind go to your retirement? To your grandchildren? Maybe how your marriage or children will turn out? Now, those are all valid things to ponder – but they're "Second Things" in life. And here's the tricky part: Second things can even be good Christian things (like raising well-adjusted Christian kids): Good things. Christian things. But ultimately second things.

So I ask you just like I ask myself: "**Do I ever dream about first things?**" Are my prayers ever directed in this direction: "God, my deepest dream is to be in deep union and communion with you! That's my deepest longing. This is what I want more than anything else in life." Because this is how the Psalmist prayed:

One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple. Psalm 27:4

The Purpose of Suffering and Our Thirst for God and God Alone

So what am I suggesting about the nature of suffering and the book of Job? It's this:

The purpose of suffering is to awaken our Spirit-implanted thirst for God alone. (Suffering's main purpose is to give you a deeper thirst for first things.) To bring us to a place of deep detachment to second things, to the place where the passions of the heart have nowhere else to go.¹

The purpose of suffering is to awaken my thirst for first things and detach me from second things.

Don't you see that worked out in the life of Job?

¹ An assist from Larry Crabb here.

He went straight away to God in the dark night of the soul. His thirst to see God, to meet with God, to dialogue with, and yes, even to accuse God is passionate, powerful, and prolonged.

It's this cultivation of a deeper thirst for God in our suffering that we take away from Job's faith.

"If I find in myself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world." ~ C.S. Lewis.

Friends, what sustains you in your pursuit of God? It's not the blessings of God! It's not even (as many Christians think in today's world) a felt experience of the presence of God. More than the *blessings* of God and more than the *felt experiences* of God, what *sustains me in my pursuit of God is a thirst for God and God alone.*

This is what God longs to do in suffering.

To awaken my thirst for first things and detach me from second things.

And maybe the entire point of the Christian life is for me to put first things first, and second things second.

Our Expectations of the Christian Life: Minimum Troubles and Maximum Blessings?

That is why Satan's question is so pivotal to the book of Job! Job 1:9 stands, at least in my mind, as the crucial question hovering over the entire book of Job: "Does Job fear God for naught?" "Does Job fear God for no reason?"

If my expectation of the Christian life is this: **Minimum troubles, Maximum Blessings.**

- "That's what I want the Christian life to be! A Minimum amount of troubles, A Maximum amount of Blessings! I'm going to live my Christian life with that aim and purpose in mind!"

If that is what I'm saying in my heart of hearts, then Satan is proved right. (That Jason only fears God, Jason only serves God, Jason only worships God, when it's advantageous for him to do so – namely, when I'm getting my blessings.)

So God and Satan vehemently disagree. God stakes his reputation on the idea that "there is a servant on this earth called Job" who loves me for me. For my nature! For my character! For my intrinsic worth!

God says: "Detach Job from all second things, and he will still worship."

Satan says: "Detach Job from all second things and he will curse."

Satan's design for your suffering is for you to curse God. That as you get detached from second things in life – in a divorce, in a death, in a cancer, in shattered dreams, in relational problems, that you curse God.

And this pathway doesn't always begin so spectacularly (with a loud cursing of God and telling all your friends that you are leaving the church). Sometimes that path begins slowly.

- Maybe it involves cynicism – of questioning the very goodness of God. “*God doesn’t have my best interests in mind.*” “*If God is really good, then I doubt he would allow these things to happen to me.*” So we slowly begin to live closed off to our deepest thirst of God.
- Sometimes the path towards cursing God begins with laziness or apathy. Our appetite for prayer, for bible study, for fellowship slowly begins to wane over the years.
- Or we think: “Maybe cars, or houses, or careers, or family, or relationships or ministry – maybe these (second) things are the things that really satisfy.” Because it is **too hard** to maintain a deep thirst for God alone!

Does Job fear God for naught? Or: *will he look to other things – even good things, even Christian things, even things that come from God – to take the place of a Spirit-implanted desire for God alone?*

That’s the question at the very heart of Job! And **how you answer the question of your deepest thirst** -- God is supremely interested in how you tell that tale.

The Evidence from the Prologue that Job Fears God for Naught: The Habit of Worship

The writer of Job tells us three things in the prologue of Job (chapters 1-2) about how Job answers that seminal question – *Does Job fear God for naught?*

The first bit of evidence that Job fears God for naught is that ***Job worships even when he experiences God as an earthquake.***

Job worships. Yet: it’s not any old worship! It is clear to us that Job had formed a **habit** of worship.

- Deep ruts had been formed in the heart & soul of Job that connected him with God. And those deep ruts were ruts of worship! Those deep ruts were the language of worship: *Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshipped. (Job 1:20)*

Worship was Job’s initial response. Worship was Job’s spontaneous response – surprisingly enough – to deep suffering & painful trails. How does that happen?

That only happens because Job had first cultivated what the Latins called a *habitus* (a habit) of worship.

“For we know that under such desperate circumstances worship does not come to a person naturally or spontaneously, but rather it is a practiced response, a fruit of long faith and discipline. Job could never have reacted as he did unless he had been practicing for this moment all of his life.” ~ Mike Mason

Job had cultivated a habit of worship. Worship became second nature to him. Worship became his heart language. The way he expressed his deepest longings. The way he delighted to express his heart. So when faced with incredible trials, the rut of worship to God had already been carved out in his heart.

The Habit of Worship – Applicational Questions:

- (1) Am I cultivating a habit of corporate worship with the body of Christ?

(2) Am I cultivating the habit of personal worship as I live my days? Is worship becoming second nature to me?

For some people, complaint becomes second nature.

For other people, introspection or doubt becomes second nature.

For others, cynicism – questioning the goodness of God – becomes second nature.

For Job, the daily cultivation of an ongoing habit and a daily rhythm of worship [whether he felt like it or not, I imagine!] produced such a deep rut in his soul, that worship flowed freely between his heart and God, even in the suffering of the soul.

What about you? How are you cultivating a habit of worship of God so that it becomes second nature? That worship becomes the very language we long *most* to use?

No Earthly Rights

So the first bit of evidence that Job fears God for naught is that *Job worships even when he experiences God as an earthquake.*

The second bit of evidence that Job fears God for naught is that ***Job accepts the truth that a believer in the Lord has no earthly rights.***

- A true believer in God has abandoned all rights.
- The true believer in God recognizes *that naked I came from my mother's womb and naked I shall return.*
- The true believer in God becomes a slave.
 - Paul begins the book of Romans like this: “A Paul, a *douglas*, a slave/servant of Christ Jesus...” (Rom 1:1)
 - Jesus says: “Any of you who does not give up **everything** he has cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:33)
 - Jesus says: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters [some of the very things Job lost!] yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple (Luke 14:26).

The true believer has no claim on worldly relationships, no claim on worldly possessions, no claim on worldly accomplishments, and no claim on worldly titles.

(Personalizing the Abstraction): One of the best pieces of advice I got in my first year in Equatorial Guinea was when an older missionary said to me -- when I was getting stopped by the police, harassed constantly on the streets, threatened at the post office & in government buildings – “Jason, you have no rights here as an American. The missionaries, who understand that, survive. The missionaries, who fail to understand that, go home (usually in a few short months).”

That advice describes how Job lived his life of faith: *Naked I came from my mother's womb, naked I shall return (Job 1:21)*

We love to maintain the mirage & illusion of control over our lives. We love the poem *Invictus* by William Ernest Henley. You know the poem because it ends: “*I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul.*”

The Book of Job tells you a different story. The book of Job tells you that some of the most impactful things that happen in your life are *totally* and *completely* out of your control. Think about Job! For Job, the most impactful thing that happened in his life happens in a conversation *way* over his head in the heavenly realm and *way* over his pay grade. The same goes for you and for me:

- The cancer that surprises you.
- The unexpected death that strikes suddenly.
- The loss of a job or a relationship – that *you* would have kept.

All these teach us the same lesson that Job had already learned: *The believer has no earthly rights.*

Remember the question God asked a sulking Jonah: “Have you any right to be angry?” (Jonah 4:4)

One writer puts it like this: “We Christians are people who know in our bones that we never had any right to be created in the first place, let alone redeemed.” [Our creation was a gift of God, not a right. And our redemption was a gift of God, not our right.] “We know we have no more inherent title to life and its goodness than a dead man has.” “When Adam discovered he was naked, he hid from the Lord. But when Job was faced with his nakedness, he worshipped, and this is what sets the fallen man apart from the redeemed man.” ~ Mike Mason

Job feared God for naught because he had already renounced all his earthly rights.

Personalized Application: How you doing? How am I doing? Have we renounced all our earthly rights? If not, we do not serve and worship God for naught! What second things in life do you sense God telling you: *you need to hold these second things more loosely in your life?*

For God, it matters that there is a man who worships God simply because he is worthy of worship.

Suffering Alone

Third bit of evidence that Job feared God for naught is that ***even when Job suffers alone, he stills trusts the Lord.***

There is a sense that much of suffering is done alone.

- Think of parents who lose a child. The father suffers distinctly as a father. The mother suffers distinctly as a mother. Even experiencing the *same grief*, to some extent, they suffer alone even in the most intimate of marriages.
- [And I say this as someone who believes in the absolute strength of community. As someone who reminded you just last week that this church community is the community that will remind you to keep first things first and second things second!]+

The truth of the matter is that Job suffers alone:

- His kids are gone.
- His servants are gone.
- His business is gone.
- In chapter 30 of Job, we learn that young men insult him (30:1), drunks sing songs in the tavern to celebrate his downfall (30:9), and people spit in his face as they pass him by (30:10).

In chapter 2, his wife – whom Calvin calls “Satan’s tool” and Augustine calls her “the devil’s assistant” – tells him to “*Curse God and Die!*” You understand that Job suffers alone.

And in so doing, Job reminds you of another one, who also suffered alone:

- The One who also feared God for naught.
- The One who suffered outside the camp.

The only one in the Bible who suffered more than Job was the One who suffered on a Roman cross.

- Abandoned by friends.
- Spit upon by onlookers.

*Job even responds gently to his wife. Though her encouragement to Job to end his life—then and there--by cursing God may be seen as a sign of pity and sorrow – Job **brings her into the circle of this suffering.** Job acknowledges her pain. “Shall **we** receive good from God, and shall **we** not receive evil.” As a husband, Job is acknowledging **her** pain, and **her** suffering, and **her** lose in this trial as well.²*

Just as Jesus on the cross...

- ...also cares for his mother (John 19:26-27)
- ...and forgives those who do not understand what they are doing (Luke 23:34)

Jesus serves and worships God for naught: *Into your hands I commit my spirit* (Luke 23:46) sounds a lot like: *Naked I came into this world, naked I shall return.*

My God, my God why have you forsaken me? (Mt. 27:46) -- Jesus accepting to drink the cup of wrath from God his Father -- sounds a lot like *Shall we receive Good from God and shall we not receive evil* (Job 2:10).

Jesus Suffered Alone...Just Like Job:

Jesus took his inner circle to Gethsemane to pray and encourage him – “My soul is very sorrowful even to the point of death. Remain here and watch.” He went a little further and prayed “with loud cries and tears”. Yet, when he came back – they were sleeping. Jesus was alone. “Could you not watch one hour?”

² And notice Job does not actually call her a foolish woman, he communicates to her: “In your pain, in your loss, you are talking in your stress **as if** you were foolish.” See Job 2:10.

Jesus prayed and Jesus wept – alone.
The next day Jesus suffered alone. Outside the camp.

Job also suffered alone. Outside the camp. Scraping himself with broken pieces of pottery.

- One writer says: “*Suffering encloses a man in solitude...*Between Job and his friends an abyss was cleft....They could no longer get to him. *Only Jesus could cross this abyss, descend into the abyss of misery, plunge into the deepest hell.*”³

Job suffered alone. Jesus suffered alone. ***But Jesus suffered alone so you would never have to.***

Jesus was the last person who ever had to suffer alone. You have access to the One who suffered alone – Jesus Christ. Run to him. Ask him to come near in your trials. And come to him as the “First Thing” in your life. *Jesus suffered alone so you would never have to!*

³ Jean Danielou, quoted in *The Dimensions of Job: A Study and Selected Readings*, p. 109.