

Once Upon a Time . . . and They All Lived Happily Ever After

In the Garden of Uz

The book of Job begins and ends like one of the innocent fairy tales we remember so well from the Brothers Grimm: “There was once a man in the land of Uz . . . And Job died, old and full of days” (1:1; 42:17). If we read Job 1–2 and go directly to 42:7-17, skipping over everything in between, then the basic plotline of the story unfolds as follows. Job, a “blameless” and “upright” person who “feared God and turned away from evil” (1:1; see also 2:3) experiences the loss of all his possessions (1:13-17), the untimely death of all his children—seven sons and three daughters (1:2, 18)—and horrendous physical affliction that covers all his body, “from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head” (2:7). Job’s first response is to bless God (1:21), for as traditional faith assertions claim, the Creator of heaven and earth has the prerogative both to “give” life and to “take [life] away” (cf. Ps 104:27, 29). When pressed to go against what tradition requires—to “curse” rather than “bless” God—Job not only resists the temptation but also dismisses it as a foolish alternative to genuine piety: “Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?” (2:10). Even though his “suffering was very great,” and even though it reduces Job and friends who would comfort him to silence (2:13), it does not drive him to “sin or to charge God with wrongdoing” (1:22; cf. 2:10).

The end of the story describes the reward this “servant” of God (the word servant repeats four times in 42:7-9; cf. 1:8; 2:3) receives for holding fast to his

Lectionary Loop

**Job 1:1; 2:1-10, Proper 22,
Year B**
Job 42:10-17, Proper 25, Year B

Sources

This session and all those that follow draw freely on my previous work on Job, particularly *Job*. Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2006); and “Job, Book of” in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008).

faith. He leaves behind the ash heap of suffering and returns to his “house,” where he enjoys the fellowship of brothers, sisters, and friends who bring tangible gifts to demonstrate their compassion (42:11). His possessions, now doubled in size, are restored (42:10; cf. 1:3). His family, decimated by death, is replenished by the births of seven sons and three daughters (42:13). On the other side of catastrophe, Job lives for 140 years, twice the normal lifespan (42:16; cf. Ps 90:10), celebrating the blessings that accrue to him and his family through four generations. When the story ends by saying that Job died “old and full of days” (42:17), it accords him a place of honor reserved for some of Israel’s most revered heroes of faith (Abraham, Gen 25:8; Isaac, Gen 35:29; and David, 1 Chr 29:28).

“Does Job Fear God for Nothing?”

The enduring appeal of Job’s persistent faith in the midst of suffering, as portrayed in this slice of his story, is clear. We need only consider the long trajectory of the New Testament’s single reference to Job in Jas 5:11, its witness now fossilized in the proverbial summons to have “the patience of Job.” Indeed, precisely because this summons has been thinned to a cliché, we may be tempted to overlook its deep deposits of truth. Two matters may be singled out for further reflection.

First, both structural and thematic parallels between Job 1–2 and Genesis 1–2 invite readers to connect Job’s life in the “land of Uz” with the primordial excellence inscribed in God’s creation of a “very good” world (Gen 1:31 and the garden of Eden). As the first couple is placed in a garden of plenty and entrusted with the responsibility “to till it and keep it” (Gen 2:15), so Job and his wife begin their lives in a world that is full of promise and completely satisfying. As a good steward of their blessings, Job regularly offers peremptory sacrifices (Job 1:5; cf. 42:8) lest any sin on their part mar the beauty of the life God has provided. Their piety and God’s promises are woven together seamlessly. There is every reason to believe that, as we might say, God is in heaven and all is right with the world. In short, Job’s story invites us to return to our

Teaching Tips

Ask group members to discuss what a primordial world full of promise might be like. How are the couple’s piety and God’s promises woven together? Can we live more closely in harmony with God’s expectations of the world? Will this harmony prevent bad things from happening? Is it enough to know that God is with us from beginning to end when we are suffering? What is more important in our lives, the promise or the burden?

“beginnings,” thus to remember—and when necessary reclaim—a lingering vision about the sheer goodness and joy that comes from living in harmony with God’s hopes and expectations. The vision is not immune to corruption; this we know by experience, and this Job’s story candidly acknowledges. Nevertheless, when we set our compass to the promises of God rather than the obstacles that impede their realization, we remember that life in God’s “very good” world should be, and can be, more than the sum of our losses.

Second, we should not rush past this book’s witness to the abiding promise of God’s presence, whatever the sum of life’s losses may be. At the beginning of the book, God proudly claims Job as a faithful “servant.” At the end of the book, despite the dents in his faith that Job’s losses have left, God still proudly claims him as a faithful “servant.” Much has changed in Job’s life—perhaps also in his views about God—as the long and arduous journey recorded in the intervening chapters makes clear, but the God who prized his integrity at the beginning (2:3) is the God who honors his fidelity by answering his prayers in the end (42:7-9). What has changed is the blessing, though we may understand this more as a difference in quantity than quality, for the source of what Job receives in his “latter days” is the one and same God who blessed his “beginning[s]” (42:12). To be assured that God accompanies us from the beginning to the end, come what may, is to be empowered to live and die “full of days.” Once the lacquer of overuse is removed from Jas 5:11, the deep truth that summons us to the “patience of Job,” as the often neglected latter part of this verse asserts, is the promise that “the Lord is compassionate and merciful.”

Vexed and Vexing Truths

Beginnings and endings are not, of course, the whole of any story; they are but the beacon lights for navigating the journey in between. This is particularly true of stories that begin with “once upon a time” and end with “they lived happily ever after.” Such stories, including this one from the book of Job, exert a mesmerizing claim on us precisely because they persuade us to commit to a journey that can be completed,

despite the suspicions that may cause us to stumble along the way. I have intentionally deferred comment until now on several stumbling blocks in the framework of Job's story that likely already raise our suspicions. I have done so not because they are unimportant but because the story itself invites us to trust that the promise—not the burden—of the journey we make with Job is where we should begin. Nevertheless, two huge issues in Job 1–2 hint at the challenge that awaits us.

The first is in 1:6–12, which reports that while an unsuspecting Job was fully engaged in a life of faithful devotion to God, God was inviting members of the divine council in heaven to mark Job for special attention. God initiates the discussion with a question—“Have you considered my servant Job?” (1:8)—directed to one called the *satan*. The definite article (the) before the noun (*satan*) makes clear the reference is to one of the “heavenly beings” (1:6) to whom God has delegated specific responsibilities, in this case to be God's “advocate” in investigating the claims of those who profess loyalty to God.

When the *satan* counters God's question with one of his own—“Does Job fear God for nothing?” (1:8)—the text reports that God considers it worth thinking about. Might it be case, the *satan* asks, that God has so insulated Job from adversity that his loyalty is not what it seems? Might it be the case that if Job were to suffer, then he would curse, not bless, God? Without explanation, God permits the *satan* to proceed with the test: “Very well, all that he has is in your power” (1:12). With justification, we flinch at God's response, and in anticipation of Job's own anguished questions, we too must ask “Why?” (e.g., 3:11, 12, 20). This is stumbling block number one.

The second challenge comes from the scene described in 2:1–7. Having permitted the destruction of Job's possessions and the deaths of his children—seven sons and three daughters—God concedes to the *satan* that the miseries inflicted upon this “blameless and upright” servant of God (1:1, 8; 2:3a) have happened “for no reason” (2:3b). There may be no more

Study Bible

For further discussion, see *NISB*, 705–6, and *NISB*, “Excursus: Satan in the Old Testament,” 747.

Teaching Tips

Ask the group to discuss the idea that God might allow human suffering. Do the group members think all bad things happen for a reason? Does God reward the righteous or do the righteous suffer as much (or more) than the unrighteous? A stumbling block may be that we might not understand God's “reasons.” Is it necessary for you to understand? How does this inability to understand relate to the concept of faith?

unsettling words in all of sacred scripture. We read them, and, again, we instinctively wince at their assault on our sensibilities. Is it conceivable that the sovereign and just God in whom the righteous place their trust can act in this way? We may ask “Why?” but if we risk the question, then we must be prepared to learn, with Job, that the answer may exceed all comprehension. This is stumbling block number two.

If we are to get past these stumbling blocks, and the questions that follow in their wake, then we must ponder deeply the silence (2:13) they evoke from Job, his friends, and God (who will not speak another word until Job 38). Between the beginning of the journey with God and its ending, those who choose to walk in the footsteps of Job must pause inside this silence, lest our words trivialize the vexed and vexing truth we commit ourselves to follow.

Reflections

The Advocate (the *satan*) in this story is not the demonic enemy of God that we associate with pure evil, but a sort of colleague of God’s. Ponder the concept presented here that God discusses things with other “heavenly beings” and places bets on human behavior. How does this correspond or conflict with your idea of God’s nature? A stumbling block is “Why?” When have you asked this question?