

“The Prayer of Job”

Job 42:1-6

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I think one Old Testament scholar put it best when he said that the book of Job is not for the casual reader. You see, what has made Job the subject of so many books and articles is that it shakes up our most basic assumptions about God, ESPECIALLY in the way God is portrayed in it. To begin with, it opens with God accepting a wager from SATAN to test Job’s faith and prove if he’ll remain as committed to God in times of suffering and tragedy as he has in times of prosperity. Then, God allows Job, who has always been his faithful servant, to lose all his property and possessions, watch his children die, and then have his health completely break down- all for the purpose of proving his point. And when Job decries the unjustness of it all, that he has spent his whole life in faithful service to God and does not deserve any of this, rather than COMFORTING Job, God BERATES him for daring to question him in the FIRST place. As the British author Virginia Woolf wrote a century ago to her friend Lady Robert Cecil, “I read the Book of Job last night. I don’t think God comes well out of it.”

Throughout most of the book, Job feels victimized by God and by life. He insists that if the good are supposed to prosper and the bad punished for all their wickedness, then why has it not worked out that way for HIM? He finally receives a response 38 chapters into it when from out of the whirlwind, God basically says, “All right Job, I’ve listened to you long enough. Now shut up and hear ME speak!” Rather than explain to Job how his sufferings have all been part of an elaborate test, God answers Job’s questions with questions of his OWN. In verse after verse of some of the Bible’s most dramatic poetry, God reveals just how small and limited a man he really is. God tells him:

*‘Gird up your loins like a man;
I will question you, and you declare to me.
Will you even put me in the wrong?
Will you condemn me that you may be justified?
Have you an arm like God,
and can you thunder with a voice like his?...*

*‘Can you draw out Leviathan with a fish-hook,
or press down its tongue with a cord?
Can you put a rope in its nose,
or pierce its jaw with a hook?*

God wants Job to understand that life is NOT fair for most people, that often the unrighteous DO prosper and the good DO die young. However, that doesn’t mean that God is BLIND TO or ABSENT or UNCONCERNED about his plight. On the CONTRARY, the fact that God PERSONALLY addresses him from out of the whirlwind to speak to his concerns demonstrates just how much God is aware of them. But God’s response to human suffering is NOT to magically make all things right such as to make that cancer disappear or that addiction to drugs or alcohol to mysteriously vanish, nor does God cause one to win the lottery in order to end all one’s financial problems- that’s not what God is PRIMARILY all about. Although Jesus

DID instruct us to pray for specific things, we can't treat God like some kind of a genie who through out prayers we magically conjure up to take care of all our problems and fulfill all our wishes. Prayer is FOREMOST a means by which we draw ever closer to God and sense God's abiding presence when we most need it. Prayer is a way of reminding OURSELVES that even when life is at its hardest, we are never alone but that we stand side-by-side and shoulder-to-shoulder with One who promises to never leave or forsake us.

You'll often hear those television preachers say how there are ten thousand promises in the Bible and every one of them is yours, but that's not exactly true. Fundamentally, there is but ONE promise with all the OTHERS being an extension or recaptulation of it. And that promise is THIS: "I, the Lord your God, love you with an everlasting love and nothing, NO NOTHING--either in this world or above it or even below it--will ever be able to separate you from my presence or my love." As a result, we discover how we will never have to go through life alone, EVER! A favorite prayer of mine goes, "Lord, I do not pray that you remove the weight from off my back. I only ask that you give me a stronger back with which to bear it." You see, more often than not, instead of removing those obstacles that often obstruct our path or the terrible weight we find ourselves often forced to bear, we discover that God will give us STRONGER BACKS, STRONGER HEARTS, AND STRONGER MINDS to overcome them with. I cannot repeat enough how I believe God's PRIMARY response to human pain is to stand WITH us, SURROUNDING us with his presence and FILLING us with his love. He accomplishes this through his Holy Spirit which takes up residence in our heart thereby making it his home; and through the love, support and encouragement we receive through his Church, the "Body of Christ." Thus, we find that we are not only NEVER ALONE, but are assured that there is now nothing in this world that can possibly crush or destroy us, that endowed with such great spiritual resources as these, we are now able to confront and overcome whatever it is life may hand us.

With Job's prayer in chapter 42, we reach the climax of the book. After trying so long and so hard to vindicate himself, arguing how the amount of his sufferings violate every standard of divine justice, he is finally humbled to where he offers God a sincere apology and accepts his fate. We no longer see Job bargaining with God or making deals with him. Instead, he stands before God as though he were naked, as one with absolutely no claim upon God or God's blessings. This is a complete reversal for where at the BEGINNING of the book, Job remains confident of his own righteousness and of his claim before God, by the END, we see a man completely submitted to God, now willing to trust him IN SPITE of whatever situation or circumstance he happens to find himself in.

Faith can only grow and mature, not when we experience prosperity and things are going great for us, but when we have endured poverty and loss and sorrow and disease and loneliness. Faith triumphs only when it has gone through the fires of adversity for that is the process by which we discover whether that which passes for faith is REAL or not, when what we've believed in is sturdy enough to help us through life's toughest ordeals. The finest and strongest Christians always seem to be those who have weathered the greatest struggles and deepest sorrows, and yet have intimately experienced God's presence and love to help them through. As the Apostle Paul asked in his Epistle to the Romans, "If God be for us, who then can be AGAINST us!"

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was the celebrated German pastor and theologian who was arrested and sentenced to death for his participation in the plot to kill Adolph Hitler. His time in prison

was an inspiration to everyone else in there, INCLUDING his German captors. One of his fellow prisoners was an Englishman who knew nothing of his past, his background, or his importance. However, in the aftermath of Bonhoeffer's execution, he said this about him:

Bonhoeffer was all humility and sweetness; he always seemed to diffuse an atmosphere of happiness, of joy in every smallest event in life, and of deep gratitude for the mere fact that he was alive...He was one of the very few men I have ever met to whom his God was real and ever close to him...In fact, my feeling was far stronger than these words imply. He was, without exception, the finest and most lovable man I have ever met.

Shortly before being taken out and hung, based on an order from Hitler HIMSELF, the doctor at Flossenburg Prison testified as to his serene manner. He saw Bonhoeffer through the half-open door remove his prison garb, kneel on the floor, and then begin praying fervently to his God. He was so impressed by his calm reverential demeanor that the doctor later said:

I was MOST deeply moved by the way this lovable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution, he again said a short prayer and then climbed the steps to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued after a few seconds. In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer had NEVER been afraid of death because he understood something that the APOSTLE PAUL HIMSELF knew all-too well. While Paul was ALSO imprisoned and under the sentence of death, he wrote to his fellow Christians in Philippi, "For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." You see, only a mind completely taken with the thought of God and a heart submitted to God's will could endure sufferings so faithfully and confront a fate so calmly. Their respective experiences had taught BOTH men that when they trusted in the abiding love and mercy and personal presence of Christ himself, they could then live without being afraid of any human being or fearful of any condition or situation, EVEN DEATH ITSELF. Only THEN could it be said that one was TRULY free!

Kayla Mueller was an American human rights activist who was abducted by ISIS after leaving a Doctors Without Borders hospital in Syria ten years ago. During the two years of her captivity, she was subjected to repeated rapes and torture from her captors before being killed by them. While in captivity, she wrote a letter to her family telling them how much she loved them, that she was all right and they were not to worry. In it, she said:

If you could say I have "suffered" at all throughout this whole experience it is only in knowing how much suffering I have put you all through...I remember mom always telling me that all in all in the end the only one you really have is God. I have come to a place in experience where, in every sense of the word, I have surrendered myself to our creator because literally there was no one else. By God and by your prayers I have felt tenderly cradled in freefall. I have been shown in darkness, light and have learned that EVEN in prison, one can be free. I am grateful. I have come to see that there is good in every situation, sometimes we just have to look for it. I pray each day that if nothing else, you have felt a certain closeness and surrender to God as well and have formed a bond of love and support amongst one another.

Through her capture and imprisonment, Kayla had discovered that which Christian mystics have taught for centuries- how when we've come to the place of surrendering ourselves so completely

to our Creator because there was literally no one else to go to, and when we continued to trust in our God IN SPITE of whatever situation or circumstance we happen to find ourselves in, THEN, just like the Apostle Paul and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, we TOO can feel God's peace and love EVEN WHILE FACING DEATH FROM THE INSIDES OF A PRISON CELL.

When Job emerges from his trial, he is an altogether DIFFERENT man than he was before. He discovers that his ULTIMATE security and support does not come from his livestock and massive landholdings, not from his large family or even from some reservoir of faith and strength deep within himself. Rather, it lies in God ALONE. Therefore he can now say:

*I know that you can do all things,
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.
"Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?"
Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.
"Hear, and I will speak;
I will question you, and you declare to me."*

*I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees you;
therefore I despise myself,
and repent in dust and ashes.'*

This final prayer is certainly no expression of defeat or resignation. Job is not throwing up his hands here and saying, "All right, God, you win and I lose. You can have it YOUR way." Rather, it is an entirely DIFFERENT response. His prayer marks the end of all his striving and a release from all the frustration and resentment he has. He acknowledges his vulnerability before the greatness of God and is now content to leave life with all its questions in GOD'S hands rather than complaining about the seeming unfairness of it all. He now understands how regardless if tragedy and suffering come his way, when the heart is filled with all kinds of anger and bitterness toward God and the world, it not only poisons every one of our relationships, it can turn INWARD and eventually destroy US as well. Thus, Job had to LOSE himself and everything he owned in order to discover the patient presence of God who would never give up on him. He now acknowledges that life is ultimately a great mystery, and yet IN SPITE of the lack of clear answers, God is STILL there for him. As one writer has put it: "To trust God when we understand Him would be but a sorry triumph. To trust God when we have every reason for DISTRUSTING Him, save our inward certainty of Him, is the SUPREME victory of religion. THIS is the victory which Job achieves."

The book of Job is often interpreted to be one long lamentation, a lament being the most intimate and genuine cry of a person's soul. The Psalms are full of them such as: "O Lord, my God, I call for help by day; I cry out in the night before thee... For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol"(Ps. 88:1,3) or "Why dost thou hide thy face? Why dost thou forget our affliction and oppression?"(Ps. 44:24) or "How long, O Lord? Wilt thou be angry forever? Will thy jealous wrath burn like fire?"(Ps. 79:6) Their power lies in that we come before God boldly and directly and with all our defenses stripped away so that there is nothing standing between us and him. Such laments are often our DEEPEST and MOST HONEST prayers.

Of course, the GREATEST lament had to be our Lord's shout from the cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Writing about this, the German pastor and theologian Helmut Thielicke remarked how in that cry, Jesus was not asking those around the cross to come and witness his torment. Rather, he was turning to and addressing GOD about his forsakenness. He cried, "MY God, MY God" and so he still HAS God. The forsakenness he experienced was overcome in the very CRYING of it. Jesus, acknowledges and confesses to the Father his utter abandonment, and in the very act of confessing it to him, he is NO LONGER forsaken.

This is a most profound insight, that REGARDLESS how intense or profound our suffering or loneliness or rejection may be, and REGARDLESS how distant and silent God might seem to us in that hour, when we direct our OWN cries to God from out of a humble and sincere heart, by the very act of ACKNOWLEDGING and SEEKING him, we are then NO LONGER forsaken but completely within God's grasp. When we cry out and confess our own fear or confusion or doubt to God, simply by directing it towards him, we are then no longer forsaken, no longer alone, for there is still someone to whom we can say, "Father," someone who yet remains our God. Perhaps we might not see or hear God at the time but God and his merciful love is present ALL THE SAME and of THAT, we are ASSURED!

I wish to close with a poem written by Bonhoeffer during his imprisonment. Shortly before his execution, he was able to get it smuggled out and it has since been adapted by musicologists to become one of the most poignant and beautiful hymns in all christendom:

*By gracious powers so wonderfully sheltered,
And confidently waiting come what may,
we know that God is with us night and morning,
and never fails to greet us each new day.*

*Yet is this heart by its old foe tormented,
Still evil days bring burdens hard to bear;
Oh, give our frightened souls the sure salvation
for which, O Lord, You taught us to prepare.*

*And when this cup You give is filled to brimming
With bitter suffering, hard to understand,
we take it thankfully and without trembling,
out of so good and so beloved a hand.*

*Yet when again in this same world You give us
The joy we had, the brightness of Your Sun,
we shall remember all the days we lived through,
and our whole life shall then be Yours alone.*

Friends, if YOU feel "tormented," "burdened," and "brimming with bitter suffering"; if you are afflicted, cast down, stressed out, or facing difficult times, then be assured of this, that God STILL comes for you- in the good times and in the bad, at morning and in the night, through the light and during the darkness. In the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, he entered our world as a thumb-sucking, diaper-wetting baby to become "one with us" in every way. He experienced our joys as well as our tragedies—including DEATH ITSELF--until he was mercifully raised from his tomb three days later. Thus there is NOTHING about us and

about life itself that he doesn't understand for he has seen and experienced it all. EVEN NOW, he holds and supports each one of us with his own nail-pierced hands. So I say to you this morning, LOOK to Christ, SEEK his strength, HOLD FAST to his word and YOU TOO will experience that SAME peace, that SAME strength which will enable YOU to surmount every difficulty. Let us pray...

Heavenly Father, help us to submit ourselves completely into your hands. Help us to abandon every care, every worry, every need to justify ourselves and instead to trust you to take care of them for us. In this way, we shall experience your peace and grow in your love. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.