

The Patience of Job
(Half Truths: Things You Only Thought Were In the Bible, Part 5)

Job 19:1-26; James 5:7-11

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First
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I

There is a humorous scene in a short story by Wendell Berry.

The husband and wife are in bed,
 but he feels so bad he can't go to sleep.

So he says to his wife,
 "Honey, I feel so bad...would you say a prayer for me?"

She starts praying:
 "Dear God, please help my old drunk husband to feel better."

He stops her:
 "Wait! Wait! Don't tell God I'm drunk! Tell him I'm sick."

This little story raises an important issue for all of us:

What do you say to God when you are in trouble?

How do you respond to crises and adversity in your life?

Would you say that you have "the patience of Job?"

Probably not—but that's okay.

As theologian Dan Clendenin points out:

Even people who are ignorant of the Bible speak about the "patience of Job" as a complimentary proverb, but I've never understood why. Job is anything but patient.

II

In fact, one is hard pressed to find a biblical character who was *less* patient than Job!

Perhaps it's possible to make the claim that Job was patient—
in the beginning.

In chapter 1 he says,

*The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away;
blessed be the name of the Lord.*

In chapter 2 he says to his wife,

*Shall we receive the good at the hand of God,
and not receive the bad?*

Twice at the end of each of the first two chapters the author notes Job's patience:

In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong-doing (1:22).

In all this Job did not sin with his lips (2:10b).

But then we come to chapter 3 and Job's change of tone is stunning.

Job's first extended speech begins with a curse of the day he was born:

*Let the day perish on which I was born,
and the night that said, 'A man-child is conceived' (Job 3:3).*

That same speech ends with the declaration,

*I am not at ease, nor am I quiet;
I have no rest; but trouble comes (Job 3:26).*

This is hardly a model of patience.

In fact, one of Job's three friends, Eliphaz,
counsels him to be patient,
saying that God will eventually deliver Job from all his troubles.

But Job rejects such simplistic counsel, asking instead in chapter 6, verse 11,

*What is my strength, that I should wait?
And what is my end, that I should be patient?*

Over the course of 29 chapters, Job rails against his misfortunes,
rails against his suffering,
rails against the unfairness and injustice of it all,
rails even against God!

For example, here is what Job says in chapter 23:2-5—

*Even today my complaint is bitter;
his hand is heavy in spite of my groaning.
If only I knew where to find him;
if only I could go to his dwelling!
I would state my case before him
and fill my mouth with arguments.
I would find out what he would answer me,
and consider what he would say.*

And this from the chapter we read, Job 19:8-11:

*He has walled up my way so that I cannot pass,
and he has set darkness upon my paths.
He has stripped my glory from me,
and taken the crown from my head.
He breaks me down on every side, and I am gone,
he has uprooted my hope like a tree.
He has kindled his wrath against me,
and counts me as his adversary.*

It should be clear by now that Job himself did not have “the patience of Job.”

Not that we would fault him.

Remember all that he had lost:

A foreign army stole all his oxen and donkeys and killed his servants.

Lightning struck and killed all his sheep and the shepherds.

Another army stole all his camels and killed his servants.

A tornado touched down on his oldest son's house,
killing all ten of his children.

And if all that were not enough...

Job was afflicted with a terrible skin condition that resulted in painful boils
all over his body.

Job is a human being in trouble.

Consider the scope of his suffering:

He lost his wealth and was plunged into poverty...
exchanging security for anxiety,
and social status for stigma.

He lost his children and was plunged into grief and loneliness.

He lost his health and was plunged into pain and misery.

Bereavement...

poverty...

illness...

are there any sufferings in the world
that do not fall under these categories?

And they all belong to this man Job—the universal sufferer.

III

So if we don't find "the patience of Job" in the Book of Job,
where does it come from?

In fact, this phrase comes to us from the Letter of James near the end of the New
Testament.

The King James Version gives rise to this saying, as James 5:11 reads:

*Behold, we count them happy which endure.
Ye have heard of the patience of Job.*

Modern translations put it variously—

“the steadfastness of Job”...

“the endurance of Job”...

“the perseverance of Job.”

The Good News Bible has it this way:

You have heard of Job’s patience, and you know how the Lord provided for him in the end. For the Lord is full of mercy and compassion.

There are two Greek words used in this paragraph by James.

One is usually translated “patience,”
and it implies a patient waiting.

The other is used in verse 11 describing Job,
and it means an active endurance of suffering.

The word is usually translated “endurance” or “perseverance.”

Anyone who reads the Book of Job will know the difference.

Patience as passive, silent waiting only lasts so long.

And trite phrases about “the patience of Job” go only so far.

If Job is not a model of patience,
then what did James mean when he referred to Job
as an example for Christians?

First of all, we must understand that Job is an example of **endurance**,
not patience.

An old prayer goes, “Lord, make me patient. Right now!”

There are times when we bring suffering upon ourselves,
but even then, the degree of suffering may be greater than what is deserved.

Although suffering is not a choice,
our response to suffering is.

We choose **how** we will suffer.

Sometimes people choose to fight it...
they resist it or in some way emotionally refuse it.

Other times people flee it...
they withdraw from others,
turning their bitterness inward.

This happened to me with a friend of nearly twenty years.

Larry and I met at a men's retreat—
called the New Warrior Training Adventure—
in August 1997.

We became very close—and here's how it started:
he forgot to pack a towel,
so I loaned him mine!

I love Larry like a brother, but in response to numerous misfortunes in his life, including his wife divorcing him and his health deteriorating, Larry cut off contact with me completely for four years.

Finally last month he sent me a message on Facebook, and we were able to reconnect by phone, and I hope to go see him soon.

Some people respond to suffering as Larry did—
they withdraw completely from others.

Other people turn their anger outward—
driving others away by projecting their bitterness toward them.

What does James say that we as Christians are to do when we suffer?

We don't have to pretend to like what we are going through.

We don't even have to be patient (in the passive sense).

But we are **to persevere, to endure.**

Rick Warren writes,

When God wants to make a mushroom, he does it overnight, but when he wants to make a giant oak [tree], he takes a hundred years. Great souls are grown through struggles and storms and seasons of suffering.

To persevere means something more than simply suffering—
more than staying put.

Perseverance is “staying power.”

V

This brings us to the third point.

How do we do it?

How are we to endure when we feel abandoned by God?

How are we to “hang in there” when we want to turn and run away?

James says we must have *the endurance of Job*—

An active endurance that is not afraid to raise its voice and shake its fist at heaven.

An active endurance that clings to hope even in the midst of despair.

Not hope that things will get better—
they may not!

But hope that God is merciful,
compassionate,
and loving—
and will never leave us or forsake us.

Even when tragedy hides God from our experience—
 to still hope in God
 even when we are unable to feel God's presence.

So here is Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of our text:

*You've heard, of course, of Job's **staying power**, and you know how God brought it all together for him at the end. That's because God cares, cares down to the last detail.*

The point is not that we discover that we can endure.

Instead we are to discover something greater.

Again, consider Job: what did he discover from his experience of suffering?

Not that he could endure, although he did.

He discovered a God who was infinitely greater than his narrow preconceptions.

VI

Here's a story to help us make sense of it:

One morning a little girl sat at a kitchen table to eat breakfast with her mother and father. As she listened to her father's prayer before the meal, she was especially intrigued that he thanked God for God's presence everywhere.

After the father finished his prayer the little girl asked,
 "Father, is it really true that God is everywhere?"

"Yes," said her father.

"Is God in our house?" she asked.

"Yes," he said.

"Is God in this kitchen?"

"Yes."

"Is God on this table?"

"Yes," her father said.

The little girl hesitated and then asked, "Is God in this cup?"

Her father said, "Yes."

Upon hearing this the little girl quickly covered the cup with her hand and exclaimed, "I've got Him!"

This helps us understand Job's struggle with God.

Job tried to make sense of his suffering by desperately trying to figure God out...
by confining God to his own narrow perception of what Job thought God should be.

Like the little girl saying of God, "I've got him,"
Job tried to get God to respond within the limited confines of Job's own theological cup.

But then in chapter 38, God speaks to Job out of the whirlwind:

Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?

*Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you,
and you shall declare to me.*

*Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.*

*Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it?*

*On what were its bases sunk,
or who laid its cornerstone
when the morning stars sang together
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy? (Job 38:2-7)*

God goes on like that, asking powerful rhetorical questions, for three chapters.

And Job realizes that he can never have the luxury of saying,
like the little girl, **"I've got God!"**

Job now knows that God refuses to fit neatly into any theological box that Job might construct.

God answers Job, but not according to Job's definition of the problem of suffering.

Instead, God transposes the issue to a deeper level which emphasizes God's power and divine knowledge in contrast to the human weakness and finiteness of Job.

In response, Job now realizes how foolish he has been to suppose that he understood the reasons behind everything that happens.

In fact, Job answers God by saying,

*See, I am of small account;
what shall I answer you?
I lay my hand on my mouth.
I have spoken once,
and I will not answer;
twice, but will proceed no further (Job 40:4-5).*

Job finally realizes that it is he,
and not God,
who is unaware of life's complete picture.

So when we are tempted to believe that God is bound by our theologies,
our rituals,
our denominations,
or our traditions,
like Job, we must remember that God is boundless
and cannot be contained in any of our cups.

We cannot put God in the cup of any ritual and say,
"I've got Him."

We cannot put God in the cup of any theology and say,
"I've got Him."

We cannot put God in the cup of any church tradition and say,
"I've got Him."

We cannot put God in any ethnic or gender cup and say,
"I've got Him."

Job learns that God stands above all human systems and beyond all human wisdom and experience.

And Job can trust God's purposes even when he cannot fully understand them.

Indeed, Job comes to see that it is his relationship with God that will sustain him in the midst of life's misfortunes, hardships, and suffering.

VII

That, my friends, is what we are to discover—
the power and eternal goodness and greatness of our God...

a God who is compassionate...

a God who is our hope even in the midst tragedy...

a God who cannot be contained in any of our cups,
even when God seems distant and hidden.

When we make this discovery,
we can proclaim,
even in our suffering,
that we have an enduring hope.

So we, too, can echo Job's confession of hope:

*For I know that my Redeemer lives,
and that at the last he will stand upon the earth;
and after my skin has been thus destroyed,
then in my flesh I shall see God. (19:25-26)*

To paraphrase Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount:

**Blessed are they who endure the way Job endured,
for they, too, shall have staying power.**

Amen.

Sources:

The original source was a sermon preached by my dear friend and colleague, the Rev. Charles W. Julian, Riverside Avenue Baptist Church, Muncie, Indiana. Charlie courageously faced his own Job-like trial of melanoma that brought about his untimely death in January 1996.

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