

meeting God
on the
ASH
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Biblical Voices on God's Presence in the Face of Tragedy

Session Two: April 20, 2010

On the Ash Heap
and in the Whirlwind

The Voice of Job

food for thought...

"By the time he was fifteen, Elie Wiesel was in Auschwitz, a Nazi death camp. A teacher of Talmud [Jewish rabbinical tradition] befriended him by insisting that whenever they were together they would study Talmud—Talmud without pens or pencils, Talmud without paper, Talmud without books. It would be their act of religious defiance.

"One night the teacher took Wiesel back to his own barracks, and there, with the young boy as the only witness, three great Jewish scholars—masters of Talmud, Halakhah, and Jewish jurisprudence—put God on trial, creating in that eerie place, 'a rabbinic court to indict the Almighty.' The trial lasted several nights. Witnesses were heard, evidence was gathered, conclusions were drawn, all of which issued finally in a unanimous verdict: the Lord God Almighty, Creator of Heaven and earth, was found *guilty* of crimes against creation and humankind. And then, after what Wiesel describes as an 'infinity of silence,' the Talmudic scholar looked at the sky and said, 'It's time for evening prayers,' and the members of the tribunal recited Maariv, the evening service."

—Robert McAfee Brown,
from the introduction to
The Trial of God, by Elie Wiesel

The Book of Job in Outline

The book of Job is really quite simple, plot-wise, but takes its time wrestling with the question of where God is when the just suffer and whether we can ever even know the *why*. Here is a very basic, broad outline of the book:

- Ch. 1**—The Set-Up: Job, a happy, prosperous, and righteous man loses everything when Satan is given permission to take away his property and children
- Ch. 2**—Satan takes Job's health (with God's permission); but still Job "did not sin with his lips" by cursing God; Job's three friends "go and console and comfort" Job by sitting with him in silence for a week in the dust.

Ch. 3—Job curses the day of his birth, but not God

The Great Debate, Round 1

- Ch. 4-5**—Eliphaz insists Job must have sinned and God is punishing him
- Ch. 6-7**—Job protests his innocence
- Ch. 8**—Bildad says God wouldn't let this happen if Job weren't wrong, so Job should repent
- Ch. 9-10**—Job laments that there is no one who could prove him right
- Ch. 11**—Zophar says Job must be guilty and deserve what is happening
- Ch. 12-14**—Job complains, but still wants his day in court against God

The Great Debate, Round 2

- Ch. 15**—Eliphaz insists Job is wrong
- Ch. 16-17**—Job reaffirms his innocence and his desperation
- Ch. 18**—Bildad restates his case—Job just have done something wrong
- Ch. 19**—Job insists he will be vindicated; "I know that my redeemer lives..."
- Ch. 20**—Zophar asserts that the wicked always get punished in the end
- Ch. 21**—Job argues that the wicked often go unpunished in life

The Great Debate, Round 3

- Ch. 22**—Eliphaz says Job must really be wicked, but if he would pray rightly, his problems would go away
- Ch. 23-24**—Job asserts his innocence *and* that there is still lots of violence and sin in the world that goes unpunished
- Ch. 25**—Bildad tells Job that no one can be righteous before God
- Ch. 26-31**—Job admits God is beyond our understanding, reflects on the value of real wisdom, and then concludes his defense.
- Ch. 32-37**—Elihu (*a new character*) appears and says everybody is wrong
- Ch. 38:1-40:2**—God speaks to Job out of the whirlwind: "Where were you...?"

Ch. 40:3-5—Job's response: "I will say no more..."

Ch. 40:6-41:34—God cites signs of divine power in the universe

Ch. 42:1-6—Job is humbled and satisfied now that God has answered

Ch. 42:7-9—Job's friends are chastised and Job must intercede for them.

Ch. 42:10-17—Job's health, family, and fortunes are restored.

On the Ash Heap, and in the Whirlwind: The Voice of Job

The Gifts of Silence and Presence: When Job's Friends Are Real Friends

Job's three friends (Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar) really are friends at the beginning of the story—the text says, “When they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him, and they raised their voices and wept aloud; they tore their robes and threw dust in the air upon their heads. They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great” (Job 2:12-13). When we encounter friends and loved ones who are hurting, sometimes we want to rush in and “fix” things—either to *do* something to make the situation better by ourselves, or to rationalize what is going on, or even to try and enlighten our friends by trying to find meaning in their pain. But Job's friends only make things worse when they open their mouths—they are at their best when they simply offer their presence and weep with their friend who is weeping.

Henri Nouwen offers this insight from his *Out of Solitude*: “The friend who can be silent in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing... not healing, not curing... that is a friend who cares.” What do you think Nouwen means?

What Exactly Is God's Point “From the Whirlwind”?

First things first: God *never* reveals to Job the business about Satan, nor does God pass the buck to Satan or to Job. God unflinchingly absorbs Job's accusations, but instead of getting defensive, God shows back to Job that there is a lot Job just doesn't know or understand. Job wasn't there at the creation of the world, and Job doesn't understand the inner workings of the universe, so Job cannot possibly be in a position to understand what is going on in his situation. The implicit point from God seems to be, “You're just going to have to trust me on this one, Job,” at the same time. For us in our wrestling about God's presence in our pain, this speech forces us to see that the world in which we live is far more complex than we can grasp, and that makes it impossible sometimes to separate the “good” parts from the “bad” parts. The same cellular processes that let me live also feed cancer cells; the same cycles of seasons, of water distribution, and of weather patterns cause the beauty of the changing landscape and the bounty of the harvest, but also droughts and famines. Is that *good, bad, or both*?

Why Is Job Satisfied In the End? What Has Changed?

After God speaks, Job is humbled but also satisfied (42:1-6), even though God has not yet restored his fortunes or scolded his friends. And God has not given Job an easy answer to explain away his pain or how it could be “just” that he goes through it. And yet Job is still, in some sense, satisfied. Why? Maybe part of it is precisely *because* God does not offer trite or overly simple answers to Job, nor does God get self-defensive and try to prove to Job that he really did deserve what happened to him. God does not insist that life looks or is fair—God rather insists that Job does not see the whole picture, which is bigger than just Job and his life, or even just human beings or this planet. Another piece of the puzzle is that after a lot of people claiming to be experts and talking *about* God, at least Job has now heard *from* God himself, and is no longer talking in the abstract *about* something, but rather is talking *personally to* Someone. This points us toward prayer as part of our wrestling with pain—we are led into *conversation*, or even angry venting, with a God who at least will not pull punches.

The Odd Prayer—and a Glimpse of Grace

There is a wonderful and strange verse near the end of the story of Job: while God is telling off Job's friends for speaking without understanding, he tells them to have him intercede in prayer for them. “Go to my servant Job... and my servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has done.” And then it all happens—Job prays for his friends, and God forgives them. What's going on here? This not only vindicates *Job* before his friends (they, who have pretended to be experts, must come to *him* for help now), but also shows a surprising edge of grace to this all-powerful God. While we might want a world where every evil is immediately punished and good only happens to the deserving, such a rigid system makes no room for grace to the undeserving. And the God of the Scriptures always reserves such a right—to bring blessing beyond the bounds of what is *earned*.
