

The Impatience of Job

By David Feddes

“Why should I not be impatient?” Job 21:4

What would you think of a man who wished he was never born and wanted to die? Suppose he said, “I will complain in the bitterness of my soul”(7:11), and asked God, “Does it please you to oppress me... while you smile on the schemes of the wicked?” (10:3). What if he claimed God was responsible for his problems and said, “All was well with me, but [God] shattered me; he seized me by the neck and crushed me. He has made me his target” (16:12). “God has wronged me... Though I cry, ‘I’ve been wronged!’ I get no response; though I call for help, there is no justice” (19:6-7). “Why should I not be impatient?” (21:4). What would you think of a man talking to God like that? He’d have to be somebody with a lousy relationship to God, right?

Would you believe that the man who said those things was closer to God than anyone else of his time? Would you believe that the man who grumbled, “Why should I not be impatient?” has a reputation to this day as one of the most patient men who ever lived? His very name is a buzzword for patience: it’s common to speak of “the patience of Job.”

Job deserves his reputation for patience, but he could also get downright impatient and upset. Job had the kind of faith that hangs on to God no matter what, but that doesn’t mean Job always smiled sweetly and said nice things. Job said a lot of things that his polite, religious friends couldn’t handle. Job’s friends made sure to say proper things about God. They said God is all-powerful. They said God is always fair. They said that if we feel far from God, it must be our doing, not God’s. They said God helps people who repent of their sins. What religious person could argue with that?

But believe it or not, God himself sided with Job! After Job and his friends had their say, with Job sometimes saying harsh things about God and his friends mouthing all the right religious formulas, God showed up, and God declared that Job’s friends were wrong and Job was right. Job wasn’t right in every word he said—and God humbled him—but Job was on target in his basic way of relating to God and in his fierce insistence that God’s character and actions don’t always fit our formulas.

Friends in Need

Here’s a quick summary of Job’s predicament. For many years he was a prosperous, prayerful man, but in one terrible day all his children and his property were wiped out. Soon after that he was afflicted with horribly painful sores. Job hadn’t done anything to bring such trouble on himself, but it happened anyway. Stunned by tragedy and wracked by pain, Job still honored God and said, “The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised” (Job 1:21). When tempted to curse God and die, Job responded, “Shall we accept good from God and not trouble?” (Job 2:10) Job clearly deserves his reputation for patient perseverance. In James 5:11 the New Testament speaks of “the patience of Job” as an example to encourage and teach us.

But the *impatience* of Job can also teach us something. Much of the Bible book of Job deals with Job’s complaints and questions and with his friends’ attempts to straighten him out.

Before we look at their arguments, we first have to give Job’s friends their due. Job has three religious friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, who hear about his troubles. Together they go to Job to mourn with him and comfort him. They sit with Job for an entire week without saying a

word, because they can see how terribly he is suffering. Sometimes it's easier just to stay away from people in pain, but Job's friends came and they stayed with him.

Do you ever avoid people who are sick or have just lost a loved one? Maybe you don't like visiting hospitals or funeral homes. Maybe you don't visit sick or grieving people at their homes either, because it makes you feel bad to see people in pain. But isn't that the point? People who feel bad need to know that others feel bad with them, that they're not alone in their pain. Another excuse for avoiding people in pain is that you don't know what to say. You feel bad for them but you're at a loss for words. But who says you have to give a speech? One tear is worth a thousand words. A simple hug does more good than all the speeches in the world. The Bible says, "Mourn with those who mourn" (Romans 12:15). So if someone you know is hurting, don't stay away, and don't say too much. Just be there, and be quiet.

Job's three friends weep and sit with Job for a whole week without saying a word. Later, when they start talking, they do more harm than good, and we'll see some of their mistakes. But before we see where Job's friends go wrong, let's first give them credit. They don't avoid Job. They come to see him sooner than many of us would. They cry more tears with him than most of us would. They keep their mouths shut longer than most of us would. They spend more time with him than most of us would. They choose to let Job be the one to break the silence.

At last Job does speak. Job curses the day he was born. He says he wishes he were dead and wonders why he is still alive. Why, Job wonders, is life given to a man who has nothing to look forward to because God has boxed him in? (3:20-23) Wouldn't he be better off dead? Still, even when Job sees no point in living, he doesn't consider ending his own life. That's not his decision to make, and he knows it. Job can't take the place of God—but he can ask questions of God, and he can pour out his pain and despair. It takes faith to question God when you have no idea what his answers might be. It takes faith to go on living when you think you'd be better off dead. It takes faith to endure your worst nightmare and yet dream of a God who hears your cries.

Cause and Effect

But Job's friends don't see Job's faith; they only hear things that are too harsh for their ears to handle. They can't bear to hear Job talk this way. They can't handle such raw anguish and depression. One of them, Eliphaz, speaks up: "Job, what's wrong with you? You've helped other people, but when something happens to you, you start complaining and questioning. Think about it. Would God ruin an innocent person? Of course not! If something bad happens to a person, he deserves it. After all, God is always right. Not only is this obvious to all who know God, but I also had it confirmed through a vision of revelation, a word of knowledge. So if I were you, I'd stop griping and start asking God for his forgiveness and help. God punishes bad people, but he is nice to good ones. So clean up your act, get back on good terms with God, and everything will turn around. You'll be able to enjoy security and prosperity once again" (Job 4-5).

It sounds perfectly sensible, but Job doesn't buy it. He doesn't believe that his suffering is divine punishment for some particular sin. When Job's friends say he must have done something to bring trouble on himself, Job challenges them to either tell him exactly what he did wrong or else stop accusing him. Job doesn't think God is trying to straighten him out. Job figures it's got to be something God chose to do for some unknown reason that has nothing to do with any particular sin of Job.

Job's friends are horrified that he is so stubborn. They are only trying to help. They can't identify any particular sin of Job that got him into so much trouble, but it must have been something bad! In their opinion, God wouldn't let something so terrible happen to someone

unless that person had done something terrible. Bildad, the second friend, speaks and tries to offer some tough love: “How long are you going to talk like a whiner and a windbag, Job! ‘God’s in his heaven, and all’s right with the world.’ Everything works by cause and effect. There’s no mystery why your sons and daughters were killed. They deserved it. God gave them over to the penalty of their sin” (8:3-4). Bildad then softens his tone and urges Job to clean up his life while he still has a chance. God won’t reject a good man, and he won’t help a bad one. Bildad says Job can be full of laughter and joy if only he will get back in tune with God.

Again, Job rejects this friendly advice. He knows he’s not perfect, but he insists that he didn’t provoke his problems through any particular sin. So the third friend, Zophar, turns it up another notch. He says not only that Job deserves what has happened to him but that he deserves even worse. “Know this,” says Zophar. “God has even forgotten some of your sins” (11:6). But, Zophar assures Job, “All you have to do is repent, and God will make you happy.”

Job’s friends have good intentions. They are saddened by Job’s tragic situation, and they want Job to be happy again. At the same time, they want to make sense of life in terms of what they know about God, and they want to defend God’s honor and justice. They try to say things that will show God some respect and show their friend how to retrieve some God-given happiness: “If you’re sad and depressed, you must have a dirty little secret somewhere that you need to confess. If you’re sick and you need to be healed, you just need to have more faith.” Some people like the saying, “If God seems far away, guess who moved?” But let’s not be too quick to judge why other people feel far from God. Let’s not assume that they must have moved away from God rather than God moving away from them. In Job’s case, it was God who moved and stepped back from protecting Job and allowed Satan to attack. But Job’s friends can’t imagine anything like that.

Their well-intentioned advice strikes Job as a cruel assault. The more they talk, the more they hurt him.

Words That Wound

“You have proved to be no help,” Job tells them. “You see something dreadful and are afraid” (6:21). Here Job identifies their real motive for saying he somehow brought all his troubles on himself. They want a tidy explanation for a messy situation, so that it won’t seem so painful and senseless and scary. Deep down they can’t bear the thought of going through what Job is going through, so they comfort themselves with the thought that Job did something awful that they haven’t done, and so they will never have to suffer the way Job is suffering.

When we try to explain other people’s problems, it’s often unconsciously motivated by our dread of what they are going through and our desire not to suffer anything like it. This often comes out in the first thing we say when we hear of a tragedy. What’s our first reaction when we hear someone has AIDS? “How did he get it?” When someone is injured in a car crash, our first question tends to be, “Was she wearing a seatbelt?” When someone’s child goes bad, we wonder what the parents did wrong. Why are we so quick to explain and blame, rather than simply to weep with those who weep? Job knows. He says, “You see something dreadful and are afraid.” When we’re quick to explain how sufferers brought trouble on themselves, we assure ourselves that we’re not doing what they did, and thus we shield ourselves from the fear that the same tragedy could happen to us.

Sometimes people’s pain can indeed be traced to past behavior—though not as often as we think. But even if people in pain have sinned horribly, they need our compassion more than our contempt. As Job puts it, “A despairing man should have the devotion of his friends, even if he

forsakes the fear of the Almighty” (6:14). Job doesn’t reject God, but even if he did, his friends should stick with him.

Innocent sufferers like Job need tears, not accusations. And even guilty sufferers need tears and friendship more than they need accusations. Who knows? Even despairing sinners who give up on God may find through the tears of caring friends that the God they’ve given up on hasn’t given up on them. But Job’s friends are too busy with explanations and accusations to simply embrace Job with love and loyalty. They love their friend, but they love their doctrinal formulas more. And they are no help.

Faith or Formulas?

Job knows that living by faith is not the same as living by formulas. He says to his friends, “Tell me something I don’t already know. I know that a mere man can’t prove God wrong. I know that God is just and that he punishes evil. I know that God’s justice and wisdom are way beyond me (9:1-20). That’s all true, but it doesn’t explain my suffering. It’s easy to judge people in trouble when you’ve got it made yourself (12:1-5).

It’s easy for you to say I’m being punished for some secret sin. But what if God examined you? Are you so pure that God couldn’t find an excuse to zap you if he wanted to? I’m tired of hearing from you. Does God need you to be his lawyers and argue his case? I want to hear from God, not you. I want to argue my case with God himself. He might kill me, but even so, I’m going to hope in him—and I know that somehow I’ll be vindicated” (13:1-15).

Job tells them, “Much of what you say, I know and agree with in general. But how do you know it applies to my situation? Sure, God is powerful and just. But does that mean he always gives righteous people instant rewards and wicked people instant punishment? That may sound good in an ivory tower, but have you never questioned those who live in the real world? Plenty of godless people enjoy life and then die a peaceful death without getting the punishment they deserve” (21:1-34).

“If God sometimes lets the wicked prosper, isn’t it just as true that he sometimes lets the righteous suffer? God may be just,” says Job, “but so far he hasn’t given me any justice (27:2). God is tormenting me for reasons that have nothing to do with my prior behavior. Is that justice? I want God to stop hiding and come to me and answer my complaint.”

Job’s friends warn him again and again that if he keeps talking that way, he’s a goner. You can understand why his friends are aghast when Job says such things to God as, “Does it please you to oppress me, to spurn the work of your hands, while you smile on the schemes of the wicked?” (10:3). “God has wronged me” (19:6). “Why should I not be impatient?” (21:4).

Job’s friends say things about God that sound much nicer and far more respectful than what Job says about God. But in the end, God stands with Job and is angry with the friends. Why? How can God stand with someone who complains about him? And how can God stand against those who defend his honor?

Perhaps the biggest problem with Job’s friends is that they believe in a push-button God. They think God’s way of treating us depends entirely on us. If we’re good, God will give us good things. If we’re bad, God will give us bad things. In their thinking, God simply responds to what we do. God’s justice makes him predictable. The friends think they have God pretty well figured out. To get what you want from God, you just have to play the game his way and push his buttons. Job’s friends like formulas, not faith. They depend on merit, not mercy.

Job, on the other hand, believes in a God who is not bound to respond directly to what we do. God is not a predictable, push-button God. We can’t control his actions. Sometimes God freely

chooses to do things that seem unfair to us, things that are not a direct result of something we've done. But whatever God chooses to do, Job is going to hang on to him, even as he sometimes complains to him.

What about you? Do you worship a predictable, push-button God? Does God fit your formulas and reward your merits? Or is he a free, sovereign Lord of infinite mystery and majesty who sometimes sends explainable suffering to his friends and showers undeserved mercy on his enemies?

Justified By Faith

At one point Job gets so upset that he cries, "God assails me and tears me in his anger and gnashes his teeth at me; my opponent fastens on me his piercing eyes" (16:9). Job is wrong when he complains that God is his enemy. He doesn't realize how much God loves him and how proud God is of him. But even though Job's impatience sometimes gets the better of him, he still holds on to God with a fierce, unyielding faith. His friends are no help to him; he has no one to speak to him on God's behalf, and no one to speak to God on his behalf. But although his friends aren't up to the task, there must be someone else who is. Just after Job's outburst that God is his enemy, Job suddenly cries, "Even now my witness is in heaven; my advocate is on high. My intercessor is my friend as my eyes pour out tears to God; on behalf of a man he pleads with God as a man pleads for his friend" (16:19-21). Somehow, even centuries before the Son of God comes to earth, Job senses that he has someone in heaven to befriend him and connect him with God. Job is right. We now know Job's true friend: his name is Jesus.

You might wonder how Job could complain about God so bitterly and still have such faith? Well, senseless pain often brings conflicting thoughts and emotions. Agony can stir up our darkest fears about God, but agony can also awaken our highest hopes and drive our faith to heights we've never reached before. The impatience of Job led him to say some things about God that were incorrect, even downright wrong, but the impatience of Job also led him to reach out for God and long for God more than he ever had before. At times Job complained so bitterly to God that he verged on blasphemy. Eventually God spoke up and overwhelmed Job and humbled him to the dust. But in the end God declared Job to be right. How could that be?

If you still don't see why Job with his fierce words about God could be right, while his friends with their polite talk about God could be wrong, consider this. Who is right? A married man who loves his wife and remains faithful to her, despite saying some regrettable things when he hasn't understood her? Or a man who doesn't love a woman enough to make a marriage commitment, who just lives with her and acts nice and avoids arguments and tries to stay on her good side so that she'll keep giving him what he wants? In every good marriage there may be moments of misunderstanding and pain, but if you're a married person who loves, trusts, and sticks with your spouse no matter what, you have a far better relationship than if you have a live-in relationship where you stay together only as long as it's convenient, where even acts of kindness are less about loving your partner than about getting what you want for yourself.

A right relationship with God is one of faith and committed love, not just polite, "good" behavior to get what we want from him. Even if Job was wrong about some particulars, he was right about that. And God vindicated his faith. Because Job lived by faith, God graciously declared his approval of the right things Job said, and he took the wrong things out of the picture.

God judged that the impatience of Job with a wild and mysterious God was better than the patience of Job's friends with a tame, push-button God. God judged that it is better to love God and fight with him than to flatter God and try to use him to make your life pleasant. In the end,

Job's judgmental friends needed Job to pray for them to God, so that God would forgive them. It turned out that they, and not Job, had been in the wrong. The Bible says, "Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand" (Romans 14:4). Job's friends judged Job, but God is the final judge. And God judged Job to be right!