The book of Job begins with a heavenly wager between the LORD and the Adversary, or God and Satan, about the person Job. Job is an upright man, a good man, an exemplary man. But, if all everything is taken away from Job will he keep his faith? So, everything is taken away. At the very end of the open portion of the Fable of Job, we find Job sitting on the ground, grieving with his closest friends, and still able to say “I cannot accept the good from God and be unable to accept the bad.”

Chapter 3 begins the Poem of Job, a lengthy reflection and commentary on the fable we examined last week. As the poem begins Job is lamenting and cursing the day he was born. Why would God let him be born only to bring him to this? It would be better if he had died when he was born, at least then he would be able to find rest. As it is he cries out in 3.24

\[
\begin{align*}
  \text{My groaning serves as my bread;} \\
  \text{My roaring pours forth as water.} \\
  \text{For what I feared has overtaken me;} \\
  \text{What I dreaded has come upon me.} \\
  \text{I have no repose, no quiet, no rest...}
\end{align*}
\]

Job desperately wants someone to help him make sense of this punishment. He even wants to be proven wrong and deserving of punishment, that will reassure him the God knows what God is doing.

His friends have been sitting with him in his grief for a week. And they feel now is a good time to talk. Their intention is to offer comfort, something they have probably done in other circumstances with other people. The first to speak is his friend, Eliphaz the Temanite.

\[
\begin{align*}
  \text{4.3 See, you have encouraged many;} \\
  \text{You have strengthened failing hands...} \\
  \text{But now that it overtakes you, it is too much;} \\
  \text{It reaches you, and you are unnerved.}
\end{align*}
\]

Job has been a faithful presence for others, encouraging them in their own trials and suffering. But now that it has hit him, his old theology isn’t handling the pressure. He’s basically asking Job what he might say to someone else in this position. So, Eliphaz continues in what I’m sure he thinks is comforting:

\[
\begin{align*}
  \text{Is not your piety your confidence,} \\
  \text{Your integrity your hope?}
\end{align*}
\]

If your faith is strong enough, Job, you’ll get through it. God doesn’t snuff out innocent people. This isn’t the end of the story, trust that God will write a happy ending for you. We might say in our own words “God never gives you more than you can handle.” Marginally comforting, perhaps, but, then he goes on to say that Job is a good person, but he’s not perfect.

\[
\begin{align*}
  \text{5.6 Evil does not grow out of the soil,} \\
  \text{Nor does mischief spring from the ground;} \\
  \text{For man is born to [do] mischief.}
\end{align*}
\]
He opens the door to the possibility that Job must have done something to deserve this. Knowing what he knows about human nature, Eliphaz suggests that Job resort to God and lay his case before God. We all make mistakes, he says, and we all have to pay the price.

5.17 See how happy is the man whom God reprovess,  
Do not reject the discipline of the Almighty.

Come on, Job. Look on the bright side and move on.

Job does not find Eliphaz’s minimizing words comforting. He responds:

6.10 Then this would be my consolation,  
That I did not suppress my words against the Holy One.

Job says this several times throughout the poem. He would rather be honest with God and suffer the consequences, than admit to something he didn’t do. He maintains his innocence. He won’t come before God pretending to know what he did wrong, because he didn’t do anything to deserve his losses. He scolds his friend saying, “A Friend owes loyalty to one who fails”; you should be on my side. He challenges empty words of comfort from someone who has no idea what it’s like to experience this kind of grief. “Did I ask you for advice? Do have wisdom for me in this situation? Go head, I’ll wait.”

And then Job turns his attention toward God.

7. 11 On my part [Job cries] I will not speak with restraint;  
I will give voice to the anguish of my spirit;  
I will complain in the bitterness of my soul...

When I think, “My bed will comfort me,  
My couch will share my sorrow,”

You [God] frighten me with dreams,  
And terrify me with visions...

I am sick of it.

There is no escape from his loss, no rest from his grief. He can’t even lie down and rest, because then he relives it all in his dreams. You will not find a more honest prayer of lament than 7.16: “I am sick of it. Let me be...”

His response to Eliphaz concludes, “if I have sinned, what have I done? Why make me the target?” To which Eliphaz has no answer.

Bildad speaks next. While he manages to avoid saying outright that Job must have done something to deserve it, he does say that this isn’t all about him. His position is not that Job is bad, but that those Chaldeans and Sabeans are bad. He suggests that Job’s children were bad and that God punished them for their misdeeds. Job is just an innocent bystander. After all, Job, you offered sacrifices on their behalf.

Then he turns to the experts, the sages and scholars, and asks Job “do you know more than they do?”

8.8 Ask the generations past,  
Study what their fathers have searched out.

They will remind you of God’s wisdom. That God does not “despise the blameless”. I’ve done some research Job, and you should have hope.

8.21 [God] will yet fill your mouth with laughter,  
And your lips with shouts of joy.
Your enemies will be clothed in disgrace;
The tent of the wicked will vanish.

Bildad’s basically saying “I promise, it’s going to get better.” But this is not something Bildad has the authority to promise. And the more the friends affirm God’s power and goodness, the more they subtly accuse Job of having done something to deserve it. Job takes offense at Bildad’s accusation that he is judging the way God runs things.

9.2 Indeed I know that it is so;
Man cannot win a suit against God.

He eloquently recounts the facets of God’s power, but challenges God’s goodness. He says: God crushes me (17), God wounds me for no cause (17), God destroys the blameless and the guilty (22), God hands the earth over to the wicked one (Satan) and covers the eyes of its judges (24).” God’s power is both glorious and terrible. Job knows that. He expects God also to be fair and good. Harold Kushner describes Job’s challenge this way: “If it makes no difference to God whether a person is good or bad, moral or selfish, if it is all one, if our behavior does not determine our fate at God’s hand, why should it matter to us how we behave?”

Finally, in chapter 11, Zophar has his turn, but essentially says nothing new. He reiterates that God is wiser than we are and that we should not question God. But for a comforting friend his first sentences are notable for their sheer rudeness:

12.2 Is a multitude of words unanswerable?
Must a loquacious person be right?
Your prattle may silence men...

But it won’t silence God. You can’t talk your way out of this one, Job. Why not try just being silent and listening for wisdom. God is wiser than you, friend. Turn toward God, and you will experience healing.

Job’s final response in chapters 12-14 is beautiful and honest. He responds to his friends, I have a mind like you, I know these things about God, even the animals know these truths. But, your arguments are “unsubstantial” he says. As Parker Palmer suggests, “In Depression, the built-in bunk detector that we all possess is not only turned on but is set on high.” Job is clearly depressed and his bunk detector is on high. “Keep quiet...and hear my arguments, listen to my pleading (13.6)...I will have my say, Come what may upon me (13.13).” Job will not back down, will not relent on his claim of innocence and his demand that God give an account for why all these things have happened to him.

I find a few things about this first round of dialogue particularly worth consideration. First, Eliphaz tells the audience that Job has been the comforter to the afflicted before. He has been a faithful comforter of others. But when faced with his own tragedy he finds that his theology is inadequate. IN C.S. Lewis’s book “A Greif Observed”, written after the death of his wife, Lewis writes about how he found his own theology of suffering to come up short in dealing with his own loss. He writes: “Talk to me about the truth of religion and I’ll listen gladly. Talk to me about the duty of religion and I’ll listen submissively. But don’t come talking to me about the consolations of religion or I shall suspect that you don’t understand.” This is what

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Job’s friends are doing, speaking to him of the consolations of religion. And, like Lewis, Job finds them insufficient to address his grief.

No person’s suffering is the same as another person’s suffering. And we have to let them grieve in their own way, and give them the time they need to do it. We can’t hurry them along. We also have to be careful about the claims we make about God’s role in their suffering or loss, or how God might make up for it. C. S. Lewis writes, “I see people, as they approach me, trying to make up their minds whether they’ll ‘says something about it’ or not. I hate if they do, and if they don’t.” That understanding shouldn’t keep us from reaching out, but should guide how we reach out and how we interpret people’s responses to our attempts to comfort.

Finally, I find Job’s insistence on being honest with God to be inspiring. He is not afraid of God’s response, he actually thinks that God would prefer him to be honest in his prayers, even if the only prayer he can muster is “how dare you”. As Kushner writes, “We cannot love God with all our heart and with all our soul if we feel we have to censor our feelings, to pretend love and gratitude when we don’t feel them.”

In his book *Addiction and Grace*, theologian and psychiatrist Gerald May writes, “Honesty before God requires the most fundamental risk of faith we can take: the risk that God is good, that God does love us unconditionally. It is in taking this risk that we rediscover our dignity. To bring the truth of ourselves, just as we are, to God, just as God is, is the most dignified thing we can do in this life.”

This dialogue between Job and his friends is an enlightening one. It highlights the ways in which relationships – human and divine – can be tested during time of struggle. It invites us to examine our own theology of suffering and to be thoughtful about how we impose that on real life situations. Job teaches us about integrity and reminds us that one of the hardest things to do is to be present to someone’s suffering without trying to fix it. May we be graceful companions to one another on this journey. Amen.

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3 Kushner, 63.