

Riding the Roller Coaster of Misery:
Job's Second Response to Eliphaz
Job 16-17 (Part 2)

Job, trapped on the roller coaster of misery, faces the conflict between his theology and reality as the coaster moves through each cycle of difficulties. What his parents and teachers taught him, what society engrained in him as a child and a man, about God and man, does not match reality. Born and raised in the eastern theological system, Job's family and friends believed in the retributive theory. God will bless good people with good things. God will curse bad people with terrible things.

Here is Job, a righteous man by God's account, experiencing bad things. Job knows that he is innocent, yet these terrible events are now part of his reality: the loss of his wealth, the death of his family and the on-going plague of boils. If Job is good, why are bad things happening to him?

We face the same dilemma today. We still believe in and live out the retributive theory. Good things happen to good people. Terrible things happen to bad people. When we die, we hope the good outweighs the bad in the scale of justice.

I cannot recount the number of times I have heard mourning people ask, "What did I do to deserve this?" Whether it is the sudden death of a loved one, or the tests coming back positive for cancer, or the boss telling you that you no longer have a job, the question is still the same. "What did I do to deserve this?" Whether it is your wife telling you that the marriage is over and she wants out, or one of your children making the big announcement at a family gathering, "Hey, I'm gay," or receiving the notice from the bank informing you that they will foreclose on your home, the question is always, "What did I do to deserve this?"

The Blame Game

Job, finding himself on the roller coaster of misery does what comes naturally to all of us. He finds someone other than himself to blame for his circumstances (16:7-14). In his case, he blames God. But then, blaming God doesn't make sense because blaming God does not fit his theology. His theology and reality conflict with one another.

⁷Surely now God has worn me out;
he has made desolate all my company.

⁸And he has shriveled me up,
which is a witness against me,
and my leanness has risen up against me;
it testifies to my face.

⁹He has torn me in his wrath and hated me;
he has gnashed his teeth at me;
my adversary sharpens his eyes against me.

As Iron sharpens iron,
So a person sharpens his friend
-- King Solomon

¹⁰Men have gaped at me with their mouth;
 they have struck me insolently on the cheek;
 they mass themselves together against me.
¹¹God gives me up to the ungodly
 and casts me into the hands of the wicked.
¹²I was at ease, and he broke me apart;
 he seized me by the neck and dashed me to pieces;
 he set me up as his target;
¹³his archers surround me.
 He slashes open my kidneys and does not spare;
 he pours out my gall on the ground.
¹⁴He breaks me with breach upon breach;
 he runs upon me like a warrior.

Job sees himself as God's practice target (16:12). Cast into the hands of the wicked (16:10-11), Job experiences pain (16:6) and the wrath of God (16:9). All throughout this experience, Job maintains his innocence (16:15-17). "I don't deserve this. I'm innocent."

The Reality of Death

As quickly as the coaster descends into the valley of despair, it starts its slow move back to the peak of hope. Job knows that he is going to die, but he places his hope in God (16:18-22). With his resolve tested, he will not give up until the end comes upon him.

¹⁸"O earth, cover not my blood,
 and let my cry find no resting place.
¹⁹Even now, behold, my witness is in heaven,
 and he who testifies for me is on high.
²⁰My friends scorn me;
 my eye pours out tears to God,
²¹that he would argue the case of a man with God,
 as a son of man does with his neighbor.
²²For when a few years have come
 I shall go the way from which I shall not return.

My hope is in Him who is in heaven (16:21). I know the end of my life is near (16:22). Yet, I will trust in Him. He ties a knot in the end of the rope and tenaciously holds on like a man hanging over a deep chasm.

Just as quickly as the coaster ascends to the top, it rapidly descends back into despair (17:1-2).

"My spirit is broken; my days are extinct;
 the graveyard is ready for me.
²Surely there are mockers about me,
 and my eye dwells on their provocation.

Keeping his eye on those surrounding him, he knows that he is going to die. He

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knows those surrounding him scorn him perpetually. Amid the crowd, he remains alone to deal with his pain and suffering as he tries to make sense of the conflict between theology and reality.

The Quest for Hope

He's up! No, he's down. But he's trying to get up (17:6-16).

⁶“He has made me a byword of the peoples,
and I am one before whom men spit.

⁷My eye has grown dim from vexation,
and all my members are like a shadow.

⁸The upright are appalled at this,
and the innocent stirs himself up against the godless.

⁹Yet the righteous holds to his way,
and he who has clean hands grows stronger and stronger.

¹⁰But you, come on again, all of you,
and I shall not find a wise man among you.

¹¹My days are past; my plans are broken off,
the desires of my heart.

¹²They make night into day:
'The light,' they say, 'is near to the darkness.'

¹³If I hope for Sheol as my house,
if I make my bed in darkness,

¹⁴if I say to the pit, 'You are my father,'
and to the worm, 'My mother,' or 'My sister,'

¹⁵where then is my hope?

Who will see my hope?

¹⁶Will it go down to the bars of Sheol?
Shall we descend together into the dust?”

Is there any hope for me? God is against me. My friends are against me. Society is against me. Is there no hope for me on this roller coaster of misery?

My lot in life is to suffer as God's example of vengeance. Those who are upright are more fortified in their position. I find no wisdom amongst my counselors. All hope for my life is as a broken vase fallen from a stand, shattered. There is no hope in death.

Perhaps, you've been where Job found himself.

Us, Too

Woe is us, for we suffer the same malady today. Trapped with the ideology that good behavior brings about God's approval, we wonder what we've done wrong when terrible things happen to us. This can't be our fault. What becomes of our hope when we ride the roller coaster of misery?

Jesus' disciples struggled with their ideology as their theology conflicted with reality. Seeing a blind man as they walked along, the disciples asked Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?" (John 9:2). Retributive theology. The blame game. Someone sinned to bring about this terrible event.

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George Keralis, DMin
Designs for Sharpening Leadership
307.689.4481
September 23, 2019
Web: dzines4leaders.com
Email: dezines4leaders.com

Thousands of years after Job finished his ride, the disciples are asking the same question again.

Listen to Jesus' answer. "It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him" (John 9:3). I like the way Eugene Peterson paraphrased the verse. "Jesus said, 'You're asking the wrong question. You're looking for someone to blame. There is no such cause-effect here. Look instead for what God can do.'"

What is God doing in your life when the tornadoes rip through your circumstances? How is God working in your life when things go terribly unexpected? What do others see in you as God works in your life?

As we ride the roller coaster of misery, the words of Paul still ring true for Christians (Romans 8:35-39).

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written,

"For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered."

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

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