

This Could Be Why Your Trial Feels Utterly Unbearable

After the family business collapsed, my mom scrambled to find work waiting tables so she could feed us.

Then, when her aging parents were no longer able to take care of themselves, she shouldered the load as caregiver. Throughout the years, despite mental and physical exhaustion, she never wavered from following God. She spoke of God's good news to those around her and encouraged us to do the same.

Now in her early 70s, my mom is disappearing into dementia.

We wish that good people and bad events were kept separate, as if good habits and choices were armor against life. Sometimes life seems to work that way; other times, it doesn't. There are no passages in the Bible that directly explain why bad events happen to people who love God. But the book of Job captures the unpredictable side of life—the part we can't control. Job endures crushing loss only to have his friends blame him for his troubles. But even then, he responds with faith at a critical juncture:

*For I know that my Redeemer lives,
and He will stand at last on the earth;
and after my skin is destroyed,
yet in my flesh I will see God,
whom I will see for myself,
and my eyes will behold, and not another.
How my heart yearns within me.
If you should say, "How shall we persecute him?"*

*since the root of the matter is found in me,
be afraid of the sword for yourselves;
for wrath brings the punishments of the sword,
that you may know there is a judgment (Job 19:25–29).*

The book of Job is mostly Hebrew poetry, which is often repetitious. The Hebrew word translated “Redeemer” in Job 19:25 is גֹּאֵל (go’el), meaning “kinsman-redeemer,” or something like “a relative who bails me out.” Although we tend to think redemption involves sin, Job insists throughout his discourse that he had not sinned and betrayed God. With this in mind, the simplest way to interpret this passage is to see the “Redeemer” (19:25) and “God” (19:26) as the same person. Although Job could have used his circumstances as an excuse to “curse God and die” (2:9), his hope in God remains very much alive.

Job’s hope is so adamant that he says his friends will be punished by God if they persist in their belief that he is suffering because of his own sin (Job 19:28-29). His defiant hope bears similarities to the Babylonian Theodicy, a Mesopotamian wisdom text from 1000 B.C. that, like Job, details a man discussing suffering with a friend. The text ends this way:

You are sympathetic, my friend, be considerate of (my) misfortune.

Help me, see [my] distress, you should be cognizant of it.

Though I am humble, learned, suppliant,

I have not seen help or succor for an instant....

May the god who has cast me off grant help,

May the goddess who has [forsaken me] take pity,

The shepherd Shamash will past[ure] people as a god should (Babylonian Theodicy XXVII).

Despite their similarities, a crucial difference separates these accounts. While the narrator of the Babylonian Theodicy thrashes divine justice and then concludes with thin hope, Job only escalates his calls for justice. Finally, God enters to silence Job and his friends. He challenges Job, “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?” (Job 38:4). He also rebukes Job’s friends for their accusations.

At the conclusion of the book, God restores Job to prosperous circumstances. But in literature, as in life, God gives no explanation for what has happened, simply citing that His wisdom is far above human wisdom. I try to keep that in mind as my mom struggles to remember who I am. I also remember that she has a Redeemer who fills the need for righteousness that Job expressed long ago. God has saved her. He has laid the foundation of everything, including the goodness she will experience in heaven one day. {eoa}

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