

Sulking

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Job 1:1; 2:1-10

“Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?”

Movement 1 – The Question of Despair

‘Why?’ We all ask ‘why’ at one time or another. I don’t mean the whining ‘why’ of a young child. I don’t mean the inquisitive ‘why’ of an eager, learning student. This is the ‘why’ that comes out of pain, out of tragedy and out of despair. It is the ‘why’ we ask when our loved one is diagnosed with cancer or any other serious disease. It is the ‘why’ you ask when your job situation changes for the worst, for reasons you cannot control, and you are left in a stressful and difficult situation. It is the ‘why’ we ask when we find ourselves in surviving a life changing accident, or in a time of a natural disaster. It is the ‘why’ of despair, sorrow and tragedy. I imagine you have asked this question at one time or another. I imagine that you have been in that difficult place, that place of despair and darkness at one time or another. I imagine you have found yourself on your knees in sadness and distress, looking up at where God is supposed to be and shouting your demanding ‘why’ to the heavens mixed with rage and sorrow, waiting for the answer, the hope, or the reason to come shouting back from heaven with some kind of assurance. Most of us have, at one time or another, asked ‘why?’.

This past week, I heard this question from many people, and know that many others asked it as well when thoughts turned to the tragedy that the Amish community has endured in Lancaster. Why did this happen? How did a man, who seemed normal, turn into a twisted and sick individual and commit such a vicious act? Why were those innocent girl’s lives taken, and what did the families of the girls do to receive such a heavy grief in their lives? Why didn’t God reach down and stop the bullets? Why didn’t God change the heart of the man? Why didn’t God do something, anything, to keep the tragedy from happening? Why was this allowed to happen? Why?

It is a question we ask again and again, from personal hurts and tragedy to national and global hurts and tragedy. When Katrina struck the gulf coast, we asked ‘why’ as we watched the floodwaters take the lives of so many people. When an earthquake struck Afghanistan, we asked ‘why’ as we watched and heard about thousands of people trying to survive a winter in poorly constructed tents and inadequate shelter. When the Tsunami struck Southeast Asia, we asked ‘why’ as we prayed for the hundreds of children looking for parents, and the hundreds of parents looking for children. The Jewish rabbi, Harold Kushner, wrote a book in an attempt to answer this ‘why,’ titled *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. He also attempts to answer this driving and burning question. This question crosses faiths, it crosses nationality, and sits in all human hearts at one time or another; it is our ‘why.’ As a people, with our faith, and in our own lives, there are moments when the darkness of life becomes greater than we can handle, and we find ourselves shouting, demanding, and searching with a ‘why’ to the heavens hoping that the Lord will hear and will answer. From our personal lives to our corporate lives, we have all had at one time or another asked the question ‘why’.

Movement 2 – The Story of Job

It is a question that we often bring to the book of Job. Job is a powerful and mysterious book in the Hebrew Scriptures that calls to us when we are asking the deep and driving ‘why.’ It

is a timeless tale that we can read and relate to at one time or another in our lives; especially in our own times of suffering. It is a story of someone who is righteous, someone who is blameless and upright, who feared God, and stayed from evil, and who endured much suffering. It is the story of someone who doesn't deserve to suffer asking 'why', it is a story of his friends asking 'why', and of his wife asking 'why'. It is a story of the 'why' in all of our trials in life.

We can read Job, and understand it as a specific story that may have occurred at a particular time and at a particular place. At the same time, we can read and understand Job as a narrative that speaks to the greater human experience. Job is a narrative that encompasses the suffering and the pain we all feel at one time or another. It is a narrative whose umbrella spreads over more than the life of one person, but reaches over all of our lives, and offers us some sense of direction and a place to focus our questions. It is an epic story just like the movies *Lawrence of Arabia*, *Citizen Kane*, or *Forrest Gump*. These are movies that are not about a specific event, but are about a person's life. In each of these movies, the person, the morals and the values of the main character are what drive the movie. *Lawrence of Arabia* was an enigmatic man who was torn over his own sense of identity; a tear which in part led him in the many choices he made. *Citizen Kane* was an individual who wanted to be someone great and important, but he did so at the loss of all of his friends and family. *Forrest Gump* was a person who lived life with a kind, simple, and accepting approach which led to his many good fortunes. Job was a man who is described as blameless and upright, one who feared God, and turned away from evil. That is the character of Job, and that character drives the plot, the conversations and the focus of the rest of the book. It is what attracts us to the book of Job. We read through the opening pages of God and Satan bargaining over the strength and patience of Job's character; over his integrity. We can read (just before the passage in question for today) of Job losing the lives of his children, losing his home and his livestock. We read in this passage of God and Satan raising the bar and of Job receiving inflictions of sores, wounds, and pain. We read of this tragedy which is rained upon Job, and we ask, why is it that someone so righteous must receive such sorrow and sadness? We ask why Job suffers, and at the same time the book of Job becomes a mirror and we ask why we must suffer. We are not particularly bad people. We do not deserve the degree of suffering, the cancer, the darkness, the despair, the hardness. It is a question that Elie Wiesel asks in his timeless book *Night* as he struggled to survive and then make some kind of sense of the Holocaust. Wiesel invoked the question of Job when he saw his friends and family members suffer in great ways for seemingly no reason. We invoke the question of Job when we consider our own suffering that seems to be for no reason. We bring our 'why' to the book of Job, hoping to find some direction if not an answer.

Movement 3 – The Answers we Demand

We are looking for answers. After all, that is why we go to Job. Maybe the occasional student of the Bible approaches Job with curiosity, and with a hope and desire to learn, but many of us open the pages of scripture not hoping to learn, but hoping to find some solace, some hope, and some answers. We are back to our 'why'. We are back to our need to know, our need for answers. Further on in the book, three of Job's friends sit with him in grief, and one asks Job what he did to deserve all of the tragedy he has endured. Job's friend suggests that he must have sinned in some way for God to afflict such suffering. There must be a reason for your sorrows. It is a question we ask ourselves. What did I do to deserve my suffering? Was my sin so great? Am I that bad of a person? Did I not go to church enough, did I not pray enough, and was I not generous enough? What did I do to deserve this? It is a common approach that many will

embrace and accept. If we believe that God punishes us in the here and now, then this approach may make sense. You may have heard of Fred Phelps and the Westboro Baptist church. They have been claiming that God caused the tragedy in Lancaster to occur as a punishment because they were not allowed to protest the funerals of service men and women in Pennsylvania. They are claiming that all tragedy is the result of some kind of sin, but that it is a sick and twisted way to construe the hurts and the pains on all of our hearts. Yet they are not alone. There are many Christians who wonder and maybe believe that God causes our tears to fall to teach us, or reprimand us. I know some people who drive themselves crazy looking for the sin they must have committed so their sickness, their hurt, and their pain can cease. Maybe we have done something so wrong that our suffering is justified.

We wonder if we deserve this, but Job is positive that he did not. If you read further on, Job will not budge or bend and demands that he did nothing that would merit the suffering that has rained upon him. Remember his character, and realize that if a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and has turned away from evil is still suffering then maybe it is not about works. Maybe it isn't so easy to say that we suffer because we deserve it. After all, that is a view of God that doesn't hold to the ministry of Christ. We believe in forgiveness and grace, not in a just payment for our actions. That is work's righteousness. And what could someone do that would be so heinous as to lose a child? What could those parents have done that would be so wrong? No, I cannot accept that God is just a judge handing out punishments, it doesn't make sense with Job's character, and it doesn't make sense with Christ. We don't have Karma; we did not deserve our suffering, so maybe there is a deeper reason. Our 'why' is not answered.

Maybe we react with Job's wife. In her grief and in her own rage, she asks Job to reject God. "Curse God and die," she pleads. Things are so bad, things are so fallen that you have no need to be in a relationship with God. God must have left you, so why do you still insist on staying true to God? Maybe we have the same question on our own hearts. Maybe we are wondering if God has left Job, and maybe we wonder if God has left us. After all, if God is so powerful, then why can't God change our life, fix things and make them better? If God is so powerful, then why doesn't God protect us, why didn't God protect the girls in Lancaster, the victims of Katrina, Afghanistan, or Southeast Asia? Maybe God has left us. Maybe we are abandoned in a place of suffering to endure alone. Maybe we should just curse God, reject God as God has seemed to reject us and die.

Perhaps the thought crossed Job's mind, but again Job's character leads his thoughts and actions. Job will not leave God. He will not abandon the integrity that has been the foundation of his character. Job will not say the bitter and spiteful words that his wife is saying. Even if he doesn't deserve it, Job's fear of the Lord controls his own words and his faith. These are justified words considering all that Job has endured and is enduring, but words that Job will not speak.

We turn to the book of Job for answers, and we are not left with much to work with. Even in the very end of Job, when he has the opportunity to ask God why, God answers, basically it is not for you to know. God reminds Job that he was not present when God created the heavens and the earth, and that Job is not in a position to understand the mystery of the divine. Even when Job can directly ask God, we are still left with our hands empty and no answer in sight. We cry out in the wilderness of our lives looking for something to stand upon. We cry out to the book of Job looking for some answers for our own suffering, and receive very little.

Movement 4 – Sulking

We have received little that is fulfilling. We have received little that is helpful, so what can we do? What response can we live into when we are suffering for seemingly no reason? What are we to do when we are living with pain, spiritual pain or physical pain when we aren't given any reason for our suffering? If we are like Job, then we can't just easily curse God and hope for death. If we have given our lives to the Lord, then how can we curse the one we love with all of our heart? If we are like Job, then we know that we have lived a good and full life and we don't deserve the suffering with which we now live. If we are like Job, then as we cry out 'why' in the dark, we are left with the echoing of our own cries for meaning in the empty void of the wilderness. So what can we do? How do we survive in the darkness, the struggles and the suffering of many of our lives?

Maybe many of us would consider sulking. You know what it means to sulk. You sit and you scowl, you frown and you pout, you shuffle and you sulk. Maybe you can see Job doing this in response to his suffering. He is well within his right to sulk. His children and his livelihood are gone; his skin is afflicted with disease. Job has basically lost his identity, from his offspring, to his business, to even his appearance. Job is no longer the person he once was, and maybe with no answers in sight, and with no hope on the horizon, Job sulks. Maybe he goes off to the outskirts of town, and sits in the ashes, in the garbage, in the dump and sulks. He looks around and finds a broken piece of pottery and picks it up, scratching the sores on his skin. His mind is elsewhere as he sits and considers his fate in the past number of days. He doesn't deserve this. He doesn't belong here, but he has lost everything, and doesn't know why. Now Job refuses to find the good in life, and only sees the darkness. Now Job sulks in the ashes, and he doesn't care that he is sinking into his own depth of despair.

In the movie, *Lord of the Rings*, King Theoden lost hope and sulked for just a moment. He was trying to defend his fortress and his people, but was losing. When the enemy broke through the first wall, he gave up. He lost hope, he lost any sight of tomorrow and sulked in despair. "So much death. What can men do against such reckless hate?" Theoden declared in despair. He had given up, and for a moment began to sulk and accept that all was lost. Or think of Sancho Panza, the servant of Don Quixote. Sancho Panza was promised the position of governor of an island if he stayed with Don Quixote, and that hope kept his spirits alive. But as the two suffered more and more tragedy, as his hunger grew, as he and his "knight" were ridiculed and beaten he began to believe that he was following a windmill of a dream, and he began to moan, he began to whine, and he began to sulk.

We have been there as well. We have been in that place where we know we can't blame anyone or anything, so we sulk with a scowl on our face, in frustrated indignation. We refuse to get up, because there is nothing for which we can rise. We refuse to see light, because there is nothing upon which the light to shine. It is as if we are looking at life, and saying, "fine, I'll suffer and suffer and suffer, I no longer care what happens anymore." Life sucks, and there is no other way to view it. All we can do is to drudge through the mud from one place of brokenness to the other, hoping that things won't get any worse. We aren't going to try to make things better. We aren't going to look for any more hope; we are just going to accept the tragedy as all we know in life. We don't have any answers; we can't ask any more questions, so we sulk.

Movement 5 – Sitting with God

Yet there could be another way to live in the misery. There could be another way to view your own life, even in the suffering and the silence that still has some hope. Instead of sulking and begrudging the world, we can look to stay and sit with God in the very darkness of life. Look

again at Job sitting on the pile of ashes, sulking and bemoaning his fate. Imagine that he wife comes to him and asks the question that so many are wondering, “Why do you persist in your integrity? Curse God and die.” Why are you maintaining your blameless and upright life? Why are you still trying to stay right with God when it seems like God is not staying right with you? The question hangs in the air, and maybe it strikes something deep within Job. Maybe the question awakens something within him that had been slumbering in the midst of the disaster and the turmoil. Maybe Job asks himself, why he persists to try to stay right with God. Maybe he also wonders why he is holding onto his integrity, his blameless and upright life, his life of fearing God and turning away from evil. Why is it that Job continues to go to church week after week? Why is it that Job continues to pray after so many horrible things have happened? Why is it that Job is trying so hard to hold onto his relationship with God? Maybe Job forgot why as he fell into his sulking, but maybe now he remembers – because God has promised to be with him.

Maybe Job remembers how God promised to stay with him no matter what. Maybe Job remembers how God stayed with the prophet Jeremiah even when he was thrown into a well, even when he was thrown into prison, and even when he was taken to Babylon. Maybe Job remembers how God has stayed Joseph the dreamer when he was thrown into the pit by his brothers, and then placed in prison by the Pharaoh. Maybe Job remembered how God stayed with David even when he was on the run from Saul. Maybe Job remembers how God has promised to stay with him no matter what. Job doesn’t know if the hardships in his life came from God, but he does know that God has not left him. In the good and in the bad, God will stay at his side. Imagine that in one moment, without moving his body, Job’s spirit shifted from sulking to sitting. Job no longer looked at the world with bitter and angry eyes, but with holy sight looking for the presence of God, knowing that God is indeed with him.

Think about this approach. Think about sitting in the midst of your mess, and looking for God rather than sulking. How would that be different? How would that change your life? Remember Job doesn’t demand that God change his life. Job doesn’t demand that God fix everything, but looks to be with God. Even as he shouts out his questions, he shouts them to a God who listens. So many times when I work with people who are in a time of hardship this is such a difficult step to take. It is easier to blame God, or to demand that God change things. But to pray that God be present is hard. To pray that God will be with you even if things get worse is hard. But I have seen time and again the difference in individuals lives when they stop demanding and start sitting with God. I worked with someone once who was living with a terminal disease. He first blamed himself and God for his disease. He then blamed others and was casting blame all over to anyone within sight; he was angry. Yet after a few weeks he moved past blaming and began asking ‘why’. First he asked himself why he lived the life he lived, and didn’t live a better life for he was heavily involved in drugs and there was still a touch of blame. Then came the day when he asked God to help him. On that day, something changed. He took the first step to reclaiming a relationship with God, even if it was through demanding and asking and telling God what to do. After a few weeks, he no longer asked God why, but began to ask God where? He was looking for the presence of God in his life, and while his life was fading away, his spirit was growing. Near the end of his life he realized that God was at his side, that even in those darkest nights, he was never alone, and that there was always someone who would love him. God was always with him, and stayed with him until he drew that final breath in peace.

In the movie *The Mission* a Jesuit mission outpost was given to a different country and the Jesuits and the people who lived there had to leave. It was a horrible time and horrible news. Yet some of the priests and the natives decided to look for God, and found God in the worship

service. So they had a worship service. They did not ask God to give them their land. They did not ask God to make things better, but instead they looked to maintain their relationship with God in worship. They carried the cross and the host into the army who came with force to cast out the natives. They went straight into the very despair that was threatening their lives. They walked into the mortars and the bullets with a knowing on their face and in their hearts that God was with them.

Hardships will come; this is a broken world and until all creation is restored through Christ, hardships will come. Sickness will happen, natural disaster will happen, violence will happen, greed will happen, selfishness will happen, hate will happen, and despair will happen. The darkest night will seem to grow darker, but I remember the sermon Martin Luther King gave the night before he was killed in Memphis TN. He reminded the people that there were hard times before them, but to remember that only in the darkest night can you see the stars shining. Sometimes it is only in the dark that you can see the light of God shining into your life, never leaving you alone. Change your prayer from 'why' to 'where.' Do not shout out, 'why Lord am I suffering,' but instead, 'where are you Lord, because I am suffering?' Don't look for answers, instead look for God. Life can be difficult just as it is a blessing, but we are never alone. Yet we need not sulk, instead, we can sit and be with our Lord.

Movement 6 – Resting on the Promises of God

We are called to trust God's promises, all of God's promises. This is the promise that we will never be left alone. When the walls crumble, when the earth shakes, we will still be walking with our Lord. When the very sky is falling down upon us, we will still be walking with our Lord. When the world condemns and kills us, when the powers and principalities pull us to the depth, we will still be walking with our Lord. Even when our very bodies grow faint and weak, even when our spirits are fallen and dashed we will still be walking with our Lord. We will always be walking with our Lord, because our Lord has promised to always walk with us. Our Lord has promised to always be at our side no matter what. When we stumble and fall, Christ will stay with us. When others oppress us, Christ will stay with us. Even when we fall to the point that we nail Christ on the cross, Christ will beat that death and will stay with us. We will never, no never be alone.

Oh my brothers and sisters what a hope it is that we are given! What a peace and a power we have received to know that our Lord and our God will always be with us no matter what. There is where you find your strength. There is where you find your hope, and there is where you find your peace. The Baptist scholar Glenn Hinson talks about the "contemplative way" of living in relationship with God. Hinson suggests that when we "discover the emptiness and inadequacy of our every striving. We learn confidence and trust in God, whether the night ever subsides or not" (from "The Road of Ashes," by Gary Furr, found in *Ties that Bind: Life Together in the Baptist Vision*, ed. By Gary Furr and Curtis Freeman). This is a way of living that doesn't demand God change and make your life better. It is not one that demands you change your life because you have earned your suffering. It is a way of life that does not try to make sense of the suffering and instead looks for the presence of God in the midst of the suffering. It is an old approach, it is a blessed approach, and it is Christ's approach. I know that many of you are facing difficulties in your life. I know that many of you are looking at hardships ahead of you and wondering how you are going to pull through. I know that many of you may even be holding onto hope by only a thread. Look for God, rest on God, and get your strength from God. Then your patience and your strength will come from a deeper well than yourself. Like that tree

planted by the waters, even in the time of drought its leaves will stay green. Stay with God, and be not moved. Stay with God, and be not moved from God's side and God will stay with you.
AMEN