

HARD LESSONS: *The Voices in Our Heads*

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Life is full of lessons. Some we seek, many we try to avoid. The real lessons are simply “pass or fail,” and our grade is not based on our understanding of them, but on our willingness to stand under them.

The most important lessons we *cannot* avoid; they are thrust upon us, they become our daily bread, we breathe their dusty air, they burn our eyes, and squeeze our hearts until we cry. But if we remain, and do not cast aside our confidence in God, no matter how thin or limp or frail it might be, we will come out the other side better. Maybe not smarter or shrewder, but better as a person and as a follower of Christ.

Job 23:10 [God] knows where I am going. And when he tests me, I will come out as pure as gold.

A Man Meets Desperation

This is the story of Job:

1:1 Job was a man who lived in Uz. He was honest inside and out, a man of his word, who was totally devoted to God and hated evil with a passion.

If the word of the narrator is not enough, hear the testimony of God Himself about this man...

1:6 One day when the angels came to report to God, Satan, who was the Designated Accuser, came along with them.

7 God singled out Satan and said, “What have you been up to?”

Satan answered God, “Going here and there, checking things out on earth.”

8 God said to Satan, “Have you noticed my friend Job? There’s no one quite like him—honest and true to his word, totally devoted to God and hating evil.”

9 Satan retorted, “So do you think Job does all that out of the sheer goodness of his heart? ¹⁰ Why, no one ever had it so good! You pamper him like a pet, make sure nothing bad ever happens to him or his family or his possessions, bless everything he does—he can’t lose!

¹¹ “But what do you think would happen if you reached down and took away everything that is his? He’d curse you right to your face, that’s what.”

Was God *guessing* how Job would respond, or did He *know*?

God knows “the end from the beginning,” so He was not testing Job’s righteousness, but *proving* it beyond doubt, and putting an end to Satan’s accusations.

Before I continue, I want to assert that I believe this story is literally true, that Job was a real man, who suffered in these real ways. But I also want to assure you that God did not select this story to record for all posterity simply because it was a good tale, full of pathos and mystery. As the story unfolds today, consider its application to your own life.

You may not have had so horrendous an experience as Job — but that's just the point: his over-the-top trial serves as a clear illustration for our own. If it was true for him in such a situation, it can certainly pertain to us.

God gave Satan lead enough to touch the things that Job valued, to prove Job's faithfulness.

In the space of two minutes, Job received news from four messengers that all of his cattle and donkeys, all of his sheep, all of his camels, and their herdsmen, had been attacked and destroyed by bandits, and all of his children had been killed in a freak storm!

Have you ever received bad news like that — the kind that takes your breath away? Observe Job's response.

^{1:20} *Job got to his feet, ripped his robe, shaved his head, then fell to the ground and worshiped:*

²¹ *Naked I came from my mother's womb, naked I'll return to the womb of the earth. God gives, God takes. God's name be ever blessed.*

²² *Not once through all this did Job sin; not once did he blame God.*

Note especially, the last line: "*Not once through all this did Job sin; not once did he blame God.*" Here was real evidence of his simple faith and righteousness.

Satan again accused Job before the Lord, but God's confidence in Job had not diminished. He gave Satan a little more leash to touch Job's health, but not his life. Job's body became covered with oozing lesions. He was an awful sight, and in awful pain and distress.

Have you been afflicted in a way that could not be cured, but only endured (and that barely)?

As I said, I believe this tale is true and these people were real. But today, I want you to also consider this, that each character in this tale represents a voice in your own head — Job, his wife, his so-called friends, Satan and even God. I think you have heard them all at one time or another. And God wants you to recognize them for what they really are.

^{2:7} *Satan left God and struck Job with terrible sores. Job was ulcers and scabs from head to foot. ⁸ They itched and oozed so badly that he took a piece of broken pottery to scrape himself, then went and sat on a trash heap, among the ashes.*

⁹ *His wife said, "Still holding on to your precious integrity, are you? Curse God and be done with it!"*

Ever heard a voice like that in your head? I have. "What's the point? What good is your integrity? You might as well die and get it over with." People have taken their own lives because of it. But Job responded:

^{2:10} *He told her, "You're talking like an empty-headed fool. We take the good days from God—why not also the bad days?"*

Not once through all this did Job sin. He said nothing against God.

Is it right of us to claim only the good that life has to offer? Do any of us deserve only that? Then, why do we become contemptuous when things go another way? Does anybody *know* why things happen as they do? We often pretend to know, we advise others as if we know. We assume that one person's experience (my own, for instance) is sufficient to speak to others.

Then, Job lamented the day he was born and wished it had never happened.

His “friend,” Eliphaz, spoke up, taunting him:

4:6 Shouldn't your devout life give you confidence now? Shouldn't your exemplary life give you hope?

and accusing:

4:7 Has a truly innocent person ever ended up on the scrap heap? Do genuinely upright people ever lose out in the end?

Have you ever heard such voices in your head — laughing, mocking, charging you with all manner of undefined evil? I sure have.

Eliphaz had an answer for everything. He asserted, “Yes, *this is the way things are.*” (Job 5:27)

Wouldn't it be nice if the universe fit into such a neat package?

Job cried out that his friends were not helping him, only making his misery worse. Then, he moaned that God was indifferent toward him and didn't really notice or care about his plight.

Bildad entered the arena. His words sound so righteous, yet somehow they don't fit the need:

8:3 Does God mess up? Does God Almighty ever get things backward? ⁴ It's plain that your children sinned against him—otherwise, why would God have punished them?

Have you ever heard such things inside your own head — condemning you for feeling bad about your situation? Setting up God as great, yet disconnected from your plight? Simplistic, pious answers that do not help.

8:20 There's no way that God will reject a good person, and there is no way he'll help a bad one.

Job was in a downward spiral of unfounded, bitter reasoning — clinging to his righteousness, sucked downward by his lack of understanding, while blindly accusing God.

9:21 Believe me, I'm blameless. I don't understand what's going on. I hate my life! ²² Since either way it ends up the same, I can only conclude that God destroys the good right along with the bad... ²⁴ If he's not responsible, who is?

Job's already overloaded mind flailed about in desperate darkness, attempting to figure God out, as though God were like a man, thought like a man and acted like a man. Ever been there? Oh, yes.

Zophar offered his “friendly” advice:

11:5 How I wish God would give you a piece of his mind, tell you what's what! ⁶ But you can be sure of this, you haven't gotten half of what you deserve.

Job writhed under the pain of such counsel. Have you ever heard such voices in your head — accusing you and lashing you with guilt? I certainly have.

Job knew only God could answer him definitively, yet God seemed to remain silent. He chafed with waiting for God. Ever been there?

Eliphaz attacked again:

^{15:4} *Look at you! You trivialize religion, turn spiritual conversation into empty gossip. It's your sin that taught you to talk this way. You chose an education in fraud.*

As if to say, "What kind of Christian are you? You can't even control your thoughts or words! Are you so wise?"

Job could only say, "I'm in misery and you are not helping me. I'm in agony if I speak up and in agony if I remain silent. Nothing helps! Is there a Savior for me?"

Bildad mocked Job again: "You think you know so much. Your words sound so wise, but they are empty!"

Job cried from their unrelenting verbal beating, "Are these words from you or are they from God?"

Then, he argued back from his deep faith:

^{19:25} *Still, I know that God lives—the One who gives me back my life—and eventually he'll take his stand on earth. ²⁶ And I'll see him—even though I get skinned alive!—
²⁷ see God myself, with my very own eyes. Oh, how I long for that day!*

Zophar became more agitated. "You are making me sick! Look, it's all very simple: the wicked always lose out, nothing ever works for them."

Job replied, "That's utter foolishness. Anyone can see things don't work like that!"

Eliphaz taunted: "Job, you know God is in charge of all things. You'd better come to terms with Him. Just repent and get back to God and everything will work out for you."

Job could only protest, "The way my life is going is not fair! I won't say it is. I know I don't understand God, but that doesn't mean I don't know Him."

Bildad claimed, "God is perfect, and everything else is imperfect — how much more you and I, Job."

In all this, Job searched for wisdom and understanding, but he could not find it from his "friends" and he could not find it in his own thoughts, either. He struggled in the darkness, alone, with only his grief for company. He searched his past. He tried to discern his future. He cried out, but there was no answer. He must wait, and that was agonizing.

I am reminded of our Lord, who took several of His disciples with Him to a garden called Gethsemane one night. He asked them to wait and pray for Him while He went off a little ways to fight His own battle in prayer.

Faced with the awful prospect of betrayal and mockery and crucifixion, He cried out, as any man would, "Father, if there is *any other way* this job can be done, any other way Salvation can be won, please take this cup of suffering from my lips!"

This prayer was met with only silence. There was *no other way*.

Jesus acknowledged what must be done: “Even so, let it happen as You have chosen, not as I would choose.” He submitted Himself to the Father’s will, relying on His all-sufficient grace.

Young Elihu, who had remained silent until now, out of respect for his elders, could no longer keep quiet. In his youthful zeal he proclaimed the answer to all of their ignorance:

33:29 This is the way God works. Over and over again ³⁰ He pulls our souls back from certain destruction so we’ll see the light—and live in the light!

“God cannot do evil! He’s always at work behind the scenes.”

34:33 Just because you refuse to live on God’s terms, do you think he should start living on yours?

36:15 Those who learn from their suffering, God delivers from their suffering.

Elihu’s words elevated God in majesty and power, but they failed to bring any comfort or help to Job. They made God very great, but they did not bring Him very near.

Finally, God Himself spoke to Job. From the very center of the violent struggle within him, Job heard God’s voice. He asked Job, “Where were you when I created everything? Did you advise Me? Did you correct Me? Do you really understand how I work and why I have done what I have done?”

40:2 Now what do you have to say for yourself? Are you going to haul me, the Mighty One, into court and press charges?

40:3 Job answered: “I’m speechless, in awe—words fail me. I should never have opened my mouth! I’ve talked too much, way too much. I’m ready to shut up and listen.”

God asked Job directly:

40:8 “Do you presume to tell me what I’m doing wrong? Are you calling me a sinner so you can be a saint?

42:1 Job answered God: ² “I’m convinced: You can do anything and everything. Nothing and no one can upset your plans. ³ You asked, ‘Who is this muddying the water, ignorantly confusing the issue, second-guessing my purposes?’ I admit it. I was the one. I babbled on about things far beyond me, made small talk about wonders way over my head.

God then rebuked Job’s “friends” for being dishonest with Him and about Him. At Job’s prayer for them, God forgave their pompous religiosity.

And then God restored all that Job had lost. That is, He gave him twice as much as he had before. Of course, that could not erase his losses, or his grief, or the memory of his painful lessons about God. But his joy was deeper now, and life was richer, and he died “an old man, full of life.” (Job 42:17)

Lessons for Today

The first thing we can take away from this story is the comfort that God really does understand the alarming cacophony of voices that rage within our heads. He is familiar with our struggle to interpret and understand life's circumstances.

God, however, also knows that mere people *cannot* make sense of everything, no matter how hard we try. The second thing we can take away with us today is this — if I can adapt Abraham Lincoln's quote — "You can make sense of some things all of the time, and you can make sense of all things some of the time, but you can never make sense of all things all of the time."

The third thing we may take away with us is the raw, but simple truth that God *does* know what He is doing and will *demonstrate* that He does in the end, but not necessarily before then.

The fourth thing is that religious platitudes and clichés seldom help anyone. Often, the best help you can offer is simply to sit with them, try to feel their pain (but never assume you really do), listen, without judgment or advice, as they pour out their complaints, and pray for the comforting revelation that only God can bring to their hearts.

The fifth thing I would suggest is that earnest, honest, unpretentious prayer — both speaking and listening quietly — is the only way out of the storm. No gimmicks or promises or bargains will shorten the siege.

As I have waited — whining, complaining, questioning, and also listening — for God's explanation of the turnabout of our construction plans, I have gone through all of these stages and heard from all of these voices.

At the conclusion, I know only this: While we are far from perfect — like Job — we did nothing wrong intentionally. In fact, we were careful to try to do only the right things. We prayed, we discussed openly among ourselves and with others, we were not hasty, we were diligent, we sought confirmations. Still, no one could anticipate the sudden downturn of the housing market, and God was not warning us of it. God is in charge, even when we don't get it.

Jesus stepped into the boat with His disciples and said, "Let's cross over to the other side of the lake." Didn't He know in advance the storm would arise and threaten to capsize their vessel? Yet He said nothing.

The storm arose, and they screamed, "Lord, don't you care that we're going down?"

He arose and spoke to the wind, "Be still." And to the waves, "Settle down." And to the disciples, "Where is your faith?" Then, they arrived on the other shore, just as He had said.

You have hung on with me. You have prayed with me. We have struggled to understand, to make sense of it, but we cannot (not completely). Let us hang on to Jesus and ride this out to the end. I believe we will arrive just where He said we would end up, if we do not cast aside our confidence in Him.

An old hymn of the church says, "I don't need to understand. I just need to hold His hand."

Whatever the storm in your own life, get hold of His hand and don't let go. He is the Master of every storm.

A recent addition to our church family, Sloan Franklin, wrote these lyrics:

*"But I know that the things that trouble my heart
are just bumps along the road driving out of the dark
And if God brings you to it, you know He'll bring you through it, I swear
And if God brings you to it, you know He'll bring you through it
And I swear, I believe in prayer, I believe in prayer,
I believe in prayer, I believe in prayer."*