

A Compelling Question:
Does Sin Reap Suffering and Virtue Reap Reward?
From the sermon series on Job

Text; Job 6:26-30; Job 8:20

Richard A. Rhem
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Job:

"Do you want to disprove my passion or argue away my despair? Look me straight in the eye. Is this how a liar would face you? Can't I tell right from wrong? If I sinned, wouldn't I know it?" Job 6:26-30

Bildad:

"Good never betrays the innocent or takes the land of the wicked."
Job 8:20 (Translated by Stephen Mitchell)

We are in the midst of a series on the Book of Job. Job is a dramatic poem found in the Hebrew Scriptures. Let me catch you up for just a moment, because we began last week, and it will be important to have the proper context. I noted last week that Job was a *heretic*. That word comes from the Greek language and it means "to choose." A *heretic* is a person who stands up apart from the rest and dares to speak one's mind, to give expression to one's conviction and passion. To defy conventional wisdom, to remove oneself from majority opinion, to stand alone if need be. Job was a heretic in that sense because he spoke against the conventional wisdom of his day. He spoke against those things that everyone knew, namely that human suffering was the consequence of human sin; that God punishes human sin with suffering. Everyone knew that. Everyone took it for granted. And then Job spoke out of an experience in which he said, "No, I don't believe that." And in standing up, and in challenging, and in protesting to God, he became a heretic, as it were, over against the orthodox opinion.

Orthodox is also from the Greek. It means "straight opinion," or "correct view of things." That is, correct in terms of the majority vote of the establishment at any given time. Job made his protest and it comes to expression in chapters 3-42, the majority, the corpus of the poem. But it is encased in a prologue and an epilogue. The prologue and the epilogue say a contrary thing to what the whole middle of

the book says. The prologue and the epilogue, those who study it believe, reflects an ancient legend that the author of the dramatic poem used in order to set forth his protest. The ancient legend said that Job was the most patient man who ever lived, that he was prosperous, came into calamity, endured patiently, and was prospered once again. That message is diametrically opposed to the message of the protest of the poet who lived perhaps four, five, six hundred years before Jesus. The poet borrowed an ancient legend in order to set off his radical and heretical view: that there is no link between human suffering and human sin. That's what the poem of Job is about.

Today, let's focus on the heart of the issue. I frame it as a compelling question. "Does Sin Reap Suffering And Virtue Reap Reward?" Maybe a more existential question, maybe with a deeper pastoral concern, I might simply say, "Does God punish us for our sin with suffering?" Is human suffering a consequence of wrong-headedness or wrong-heartedness or wrong action? Does God as the moral cop of the universe send thunderbolts to us, bringing about our suffering in order to punish us for our sin? Well, you say, "Everybody knows . . . it is conventional wisdom . . . it is the knowledge of the person on the street that that's not true. There is no link between suffering and sin, and its corollary is also not true. There is no necessary link between virtue and reward." Everybody knows that, don't we? But before we make short shrift of the question, let us recognize that if we know that . . . if everybody knows that at least in their head, it may be in part due to the fact that the Book of Job is in the canon. Because it is precisely to break the link between human suffering and God's punishment that that book came forth as an eloquent statement of a contrary view. So thank God for Job—if everybody knows that.

We may know that now, but Job got into severe argument with his friends who, though they came to comfort him, had become miserable comforters when he began to raise his challenge to God. For in raising a challenge to God, Job threatens their belief system. So, forgetting that they are there for comfort, Job's "friends" go on the attack. They seem to have a lot of data going for them too. They were operating on the accepted opinion, the *orthodox* view, that God gives suffering. Job is suffering, God does not give suffering to the just. Therefore Job has sinned. Job accepted their major premise. We'll have to deal with that subsequently in another message, but he accepted their major premise: God gives suffering.

But Job said, "I am innocent. Therefore, God is unjust." Now that is the radicality of Job's protest. He doesn't question whether or not God gives suffering, but he does say, "I am innocent, and therefore I will take my cause to heaven. God is unjust." That is how strongly his own concrete experience moved him.

But, as I said, the friends of Job seemed to have some pretty good basis for their view that punishment from God comes in the wake of human sin. For example, maybe they were reading from Leviticus 26. At the head of the paragraph in my

Bible it says, "Rewards for Obedience. If you follow my statutes and keep my commandments and observe them faithfully, I will give you your rains in their season...." It continues on and on about all the blessings that will come in the wake of obedience. If you move to the 14th verse, my Bible has a heading that says, "Penalties for Disobedience," and there I read, "In turn, if you do not obey me, I will bring terror on you...." I selected Leviticus 26, but you can go to Deuteronomy 28 or you can read that marvelous statement in Isaiah 1:18, "Come let us reason together says the Lord, though your sins be as scarlet they shall be as white as snow. Though they be red like crimson they shall be as wool." That's where I'd like to stop. But it goes on, "If you are willing and obedient you shall eat the good of the land. But if you refuse and rebel you shall be devoured by the sword. The mouth of the Lord has spoken."

So you see, the friends of Job weren't just blowing a lot of smoke. They could quote a lot of Bible verses. We have to recognize that the earliest Jewish tradition was being expressed by these three friends. They could cite chapter and verse. Actually, when you stop to think about it, it does make sense. You don't really have to be a Bible student to know that there are certain manners of behavior and certain attitudes and certain spirits that lead to disaster. And there are other actions and attitudes and behaviors that lead to blessing.

Perhaps that's why Job's protest has never really gotten through to us. We may say in our head there is no necessary link, but in our gut how quickly we say, "What have I done that is wrong?" What about the way we often look askance at the victim? Why did one in five Americans a year ago say the floods in Mississippi or the earthquakes in Los Angeles are God's judgment on human sin. Why is there this popular theology in the church and out of the church that somehow or other this is just the way things are, and that God does intentionally harm people and punish people. There is a deep thread in the human person of connecting behavior and painful consequences.

It may be because preaching has a bad name. Do your kids ever say to you, "Don't preach to me?" Parents have a tendency to preach. "Don't you dare." "You had better." "Because of - - - this consequence will follow." Preaching. People don't like preaching. Why should they like preaching? The whole tradition of preaching in the Church is to turn the whole religious experience into a promise and reward system. We try to keep people on the straight and narrow and have them avoid the disaster. So preaching has a kind of heavy-handedness about it, which makes out that God is some kind of moral cop up in heaven and that you had better watch out. We transform the gracious God into Santa Claus. Santa Claus is coming to town. You had better be good, you had better watch out, because God knows if you have been naughty or nice. That's what religion can degenerate into. That's what comes through too often, overpoweringly.

That's why people have left the church in hordes. Turn on your television today, and don't watch golf. Find some great evangelist. He will give you texts right out

of context. They will promise you reward for thus and so. He'll give you all kinds of verses ripped right out of the context that will give you dire warnings of dire consequences. You can always be sure that when a text is ripped out of its context, it's a *pretext* for something else. *A text without a context is a pretext.*

There are all kinds of hucksters in religion and out of religion. There are all kinds of hucksters who are using religion as a means to sell their product, who are quoting the Bible all the time. I listened to some motivational tapes this week. I won't tell you why I got into it or how I got into it. I am just a sucker that's all. (Laughter) I've got to tell you, they used Deuteronomy 28:10, Exodus 5:14, and Joshua 3:16 to prove their point and sell their product. God says . . . God says, as though you can just take a verse of scripture and say, "God says," as though it's right out of heaven, as though you could hear the voice of the Almighty. "If you will do thus and so ... If you won't do that...."

You would think that the whole of religion and the whole relationship to God is this matter of sin and get punished, be virtuous and be rewarded. It is ignorant, it is arrogant, it is an abuse of the Bible, and it is an abuse of people. It makes me angry! (And if you want to know something I am really passionate about, come next week!) (Laughter) I'm telling you, it's everywhere. That's popular religion, and it is used by hucksters out of ignorance at its best, arrogance at its worst, and it has ruined so many people. It distorts God. It distorts the grace of God. That's why you can say off the top of your head, "Of course there's no link between suffering and punishment," until you move into the darkness and begin to doubt yourself, and you begin to look up and say, "God, why?"

Obviously there are some behaviors whose end is disaster; there are some behaviors whose end is blessing. But as William Safire says about Job, "There is a fire wall." The Book of Job is like a fire wall between the necessary link between human suffering and human punishment. We may not blame the victim, for it is not ours to judge. When we see someone in darkness, or when we enter the darkness ourselves, what we need to know is that God is there with us. God is not waiting in the dark with a club ready to beat us down.

There is a mystery of human suffering. In the first service I read the Foreword from *Night* by Elie Wiesel, the renowned author and the survivor of the Holocaust, which occurred in our own century and in our own remembrance. The author of the Foreword, Noriak, quoted this paragraph from the book. These are the thoughts, the anguishing remembrances of Elie Wiesel.

On the last day of the Jewish year the child was present at the solemn [ceremony] of Rosh Hashanah. He heard thousands of these slaves cry with one voice, 'Blessed be the name of the Eternal.' Not long before he too would have prostrated himself and with such adoration, such awe, such love. But on this day he did not kneel, the creature outraged and humiliated beyond all that heart and spirit can conceive of, defied a Divinity who was blind and deaf. That day I had ceased to plead. I was no

longer capable of lamentation. On the contrary I felt very strong. I was the accuser and God the accused. My eyes were open and I was alone, terribly alone in a world without God and without man, without love or mercy. I had ceased to be anything but ashes, yet I felt myself to be stronger than the Almighty to whom my life had been tied for so long. I stood amid that praying congregation observing it like a stranger."

Our world is torn. It is bleeding. People are suffering, especially the children. Job said, "God is not doing it. God is not responsible. It is a mystery." His friends, representatives of the tradition, said, "God gives suffering: Job is suffering: Job is guilty." Job said, "God gives the suffering: I am innocent: God is unjust." No one thought to say, "Job is suffering: Job is innocent; therefore, suffering is a mystery that we cannot explain." Virtue is not necessarily met with reward. There are those who will tell you that. Those on the religious network, on the tapes I heard will promise you assured blessing, if only you'll subscribe, if only you will send in your contribution, if only you'll do this or that. It's not true. It's not necessarily so.

Sometimes there is the person who is suffering deeply, and there are those who say, "If only you had faith and would pray." That's cruel. Don't we all know some who have had faith and have prayed and have died? God will not be manipulated into our schemes of things. Logical syllogisms do not work in concrete human experience.

If you don't believe Job, would you at least believe Jesus? That life, wholly open to the will of God, lived before the face of God on behalf of the world, crucified, with a cry of dereliction on his lips, "My God, my God, why?" Not "Why are you punishing me?" That wasn't the question. The question had to do with the mystery of evil. "My God, where are you?"

No, being virtuous carries its own reward. I can't promise you prosperity. Be careless and you may end up a wreck, but not because God punishes you. When you come into the darkness, look to the one who went before you, as the writer to the Hebrews invites you to do. We have this faithful High Priest, Jesus Christ, who was in all ways tested like we are; therefore, come boldly to the throne of grace to find mercy and obtain help in every time of need. There is a throne, there is a throne of grace. There is one to whom to go. This one is the God of all mercy. *That* you can count on.

Reference:

Elie Wiesel. *Night*. Hill and Wang, 1960.