

His HAND Upon Us Both

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Stifled Conversations

He was not the only one who lost everything, you know. That terrible day when Satan did his worst, she lost it all as well. Those were her cattle stolen by the Sabeans. Those were her sheep burned with fire from heaven. She had scrimped and saved and cut coupons and gone without in order to buy the herds carried off by the Chaldeans. Job lost everything that day. But so did Job's wife.

And when the mighty wind blew in from the desert and demolished the house in which those ten sons and daughters feasted, it was not just a father who tore his robes and fell to the ground and wept bitter tears. Those were her children in a way they never could have been his. When word came that they were dead, though our text speaks only of Job's grief, there was a mother weeping as well.

True, she did not have to endure the terrible boils that afflicted her husband. But she had to endure the husband who was afflicted by those terrible boils. Which causes the most suffering—the boils or the husband? Well, . . .

So when we read that the wife of Job came to her husband and said, "Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die!"—we understand that she was not simply suggesting what Job should do. She was confessing what she had done. "I've had it with God, Job. I have nothing to say to a god who would treat me this way. He is uncaring. I curse him—you should, too."

He was the only one who had lost everything. That terrible day when Satan did his worst to Job, they lost nothing at all. Those were not their herds that were stolen. Those were not

their sheep burned to a crisp. Their children were growing up healthy, wealthy, and wise even as Job mourned over his sons and daughters. While Job scraped his sores, they sat before him in painless, unruffled comfort.

They had lost nothing and were proud of the fact. They wore their lack of suffering like a merit badge, self-evident proof of their goodness. Oh, they were shocked by Job's tragedies, sorry for Job's pain, eager to help lost Job find the light again. But they bore no scars on their faces; they brought no broken pieces of themselves to help them hear Job and advise him well.

So when we read that they said to Job, "Is not your wickedness great? Are not your sins endless?" (Job 22:5), we understand they were not just being cruel. They were defending God! When you are righteous, God blesses. When you are wicked, God punishes. And when you are very wicked, God sits you down in an ash heap. "Curse yourself, Job. Stop your whining and confess. Repent, and God will let you enjoy the good life again—the life that we, your pious friends, enjoy."

The Difficulty of Faithful Conversation

Most of the book of Job is talk. God talks, Satan talks, Job talks, his friends talk, Job talks again, his friends talk some more, Job responds, his friends respond to his response, God talks to Job, Job talks to God, God talks yet again. The action of this book is confined to a few verses; the talk about the action runs on for forty chapters.

As you might expect, Job does most of the talking. We hear him speak to his wife, to his friends, even to himself. Most of all, he tries to speak to God. Job has things he wants to say to God—and he wants to hear what God has to say to him. Job

needs to complain—and he wants to listen. Job longs to explain himself to God—and to have God explain things to him. Every time you turn around in this book, Job is talking—and, more often than not, he is trying to talk to God.

Which is really interesting, because everyone around him keeps telling him to shut up! Job's wife tells him, "Why do you talk to a god who lets such terrible things to happen to you? Curse him and be quiet!" Job's friends tell him, "How dare you bother God with your complaints and questions?! Shut your mouth before something even worse happens!"

Job was tempted to listen to them. Don't you think there were times when Job wanted nothing more than to raise his bootless cries to deaf heaven and blame God?

God has wronged me. . . . [He has] crushed me and multiplied my wounds for no reason. . . . Will you never look away from me or let me alone even for an instant? (Job 19:6; 9:17; 7:19)

And there were times—sitting in the rubble of his life—when Job was tempted to blame himself.

How can a mortal be righteous before God? . . . I am unworthy. . . . I despise myself. . . . Even if I were innocent, my mouth would condemn me. (Job 9:2; 40:4; 42:6; 9:20)

But Job knew that if he listened to them, he would end up in the one place that frightened him more than anything else—he would end up in silence. Once you've cursed God, what more is there to say? Once you've cursed yourself, what right do you have to say anything? Either way, faithful talk ceases and spiritual laryngitis ensues.

It's precisely here that we touch the greatness of Job. Job knew that when you are sitting on an ash heap, the essence of faith is to keep talking to God—and to keep listening for his voice. What is needed at such times is not silence, but words—Job's words and God's words. Job's questions and God's answers. Job's complaints and God's explanations. Job's "Why?" and God's "Because." This book is, from first to last, a testament to a man who dares to have a difficult, unsettling, risky, demanding conversation with God. For Job, faith is finding a way to keep the conversation going when everyone around you is an Archie Bunker, telling you to stifle yourself.

Replaying the Drama of Job

We live in a world very different from Job's. We don't live in tents, we don't depend on herds and flocks for our livelihood—and most of us have had the good sense not to spawn ten children! But we play out the old drama of Job all over again. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

Some of us are here playing out the role of Job's wife. Life has fallen on us like a ton of bricks. The Sabeans have stolen our joy. The Chaldeans have run off with our hopes. We've been burned by fire from heaven. A mighty wind has shattered the dreams we worked a lifetime to build.

Though we may still be going through the motions, attending church and singing the songs of worship and closing our eyes when prayers are said—long ago, we decided to curse God. Oh, we would never say it like that, even to ourselves. But, someplace deep inside, we have ceased to believe that God is active in this world, that he continues to care, that his promises hold true. We have lapsed into a sullen silence, too angry with God to trust our voices, knowing that if ever we began to speak to him again, what we would say would not be pretty. It would not be praise.

Some of us act out the part of Job's friends. Life is good! All is going so well! Everyone should be hap-hap-happy! All this talk about suffering and struggle—what a downer! All this Job stuff—how depressing! We have no scars on our faces, no broken pieces of ourselves to remind us that the good life is not always so good. Our marriage is blissful. Our business is prospering. Our children are healthy and good. Our church is booming. In fact, we are the best evidence we know that God blesses the righteous and cares for the faithful and protects the virtuous.

There is no room in our neat world for messiness. There is no place in our neat theology for hard questions. There is no space in our tidy lives for confusion. So, when confronted with people whose lives are an ash heap, we listen attentively. We feel their pain. We pity their suffering. We even dare to give them well-meaning advice.

But in the end, the only words we have to offer are, "Be quiet!" We shush people into shamed silence. Perhaps if they had been more holy, these things would not have happened. Perhaps if they had tried harder or done better, they wouldn't need to be asking, "Why?" Perhaps if they would just repent, God would restore them to the good life again—the life that we and the rest of the righteous enjoy. We are so eager for faith to be neat that we would rather abuse people on the ash heap than allow honest conversation with God.

Most of us, though, try to muster the courage to play Job. We gather with our messiness and our confusion. We come with our questions and our complaints. We bring our scars and our broken pieces and our little piles of ash to lay at the feet of God.

Some of us bring a marriage that simply won't heal. Try as we might, pray as we will, give as we can—he just keeps drifting away. There seems to be no soft spot in her anymore. "What do you have to say to that, God?"

Some of us bring a child who was raised up in the way he should go, but when he got older he departed from it. Now he

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wants nothing to do with our morality, our faith, our God. “How do you explain that, Lord?”

Some of us bring a church that we’ve poured ourselves into for years. We’ve preached Jesus, we’ve honored God with our ministry, we have kept ourselves pure—and still that church is as dead as a hammer. No victory stories to share with our preacher-buddies when we come to Pepperdine. No sign that God’s Spirit is acting at all. How can God make sense of that?

We have things we want to say to God—and we want to hear what he has to say to us. We need to speak some hard words—and we are willing to listen even to hard answers. We long to explain ourselves to God—and to have God explain things to us.

What is needed is not silence, but words—our words and God’s words. What is needed are not polite and approved words, but frank and honest words. What is needed is the courage to continue that difficult, unsettling, risky, demanding conversation with God that is the very essence of real faith.

More Stifled Conversation

And so Job comes to meet with his God and hold familiar conversation with him. He knocks—and hears only silence.

Though I cry [out] . . . I get no response. . . . If only I knew where to find him; if only I could go to his dwelling! I would state my case before him and . . . consider what he would say. . . . But if I go to the east, he is not there; if I go to the west, I do not find him. When he is at work in the north, I do not see him; when he turns to the south, I catch no glimpse of him. (Job 19:7; 23:3–5, 8–9)

“How do I reach into the heavens and grab God by the lapels and make him speak to me? How do I start a conversation with the God of the universe? I stand at the door and knock, but he does not answer me. I ask for a meeting, but he is nowhere to be found.”

“Still, I am afraid of what might happen if he does answer. What if I knock, and God does come to the door—but he does not know me? Oh, he may know my name, he may know some details about me. But what if he doesn’t understand what it means to be me? What if, when I speak of pain, he just looks at me? What if, when I talk of weakness or doubt, he shakes his head?

What if, God being God and all, he doesn’t understand what it is to be human?”

Do you have eyes of flesh? Do you see as a mortal sees? Are your days like those of a mortal or your years like those of a man? . . . [Your] wisdom is profound, [your] power is vast. . . . [You] move mountains. . . . [You] shake the earth. . . . [You] perform wonders that cannot be fathomed. . . . What is man that you should attend to him? (Job 10:4–5; 9:4–6, 10; 7:17)

“I am angry! I want some answers from God!—but, when he opens the door, what can I possibly say?”

He is not a man like me that I might answer him, that we might confront each other in court. . . . How can I dispute with him? How can I find words to argue with him? (Job 9:32, 14)

Job has a problem. Job wants to talk with God. He needs to talk with God. But there he stands at heaven’s door. His hand is drawn back to knock. He is ready to speak, when—suddenly—he realizes he does not know how.

The Middle Man

It is easy enough to talk to God when we’re rolling in blessings and living high on the hog. Then it’s easy to praise him and thank him and worship him. Our prayers fly like arrows straight to heaven; his guidance and wisdom flow like a stream from above. It’s easy to carry on a faithful conversation then.

What’s hard—what’s really hard—is having a conversation with God when he seems a million miles away. Shout as loud as we want to—we are not sure God hears. Listen closely for some word from on high—where is his answer? It is a strange fact of spiritual life that at the times we most need conversation with God, he seems the farthest away from us, the least accessible, the most frightening.

Job learned how hard it is to talk to God at such times. Standing at the door, ready to knock, eager to speak—Job, for the first time, is at a loss for words. And it is in that loss that Job experiences his finest moment.

If only there were someone to arbitrate between us, to lay his hand upon us both, someone to remove God’s rod from me, so that his terror would frighten me no more. Then I would speak up without fear of him, but as it now stands with me, I cannot. (Job 9:33–35)

I need a friend who will plead for me with God. I need someone who can stand between us,” says Job. “I need an intercessor. I need an advocate. I need someone to stand between us. Someone with one foot on the ash heap and one foot in heaven. Someone who knows what it is to be flesh and what it is to be God. Someone who speaks in the tongues of men and of angels. If only there were someone to lay his hand on me and explain what God is doing. If only there were someone to lay his hand

upon God and speak for me. Then I could talk to God and know that he would hear me. Then God could speak to me, and I would not be overwhelmed.”

In the end, Job has to meet with God alone. God booms from the heavens and says, “I am God.” And in the end, Job is reduced to silence. “I put my hand over my mouth. I spoke once, but I have no answer—twice, but I will say no more.”

Job wanted a middle man, but he did not find one. He was a man before his time. He did not know that God’s middle man was on his way.

Jesus and Faithful Conversation

We live in a world very different from Job’s. Oh, our lives still get messy and confused. We still long to bring our questions and complaints to God. There are still those around us who tell us to stifle ourselves when we try to keep talking. We still find conversation with God a difficult, unsettling, risky, demanding endeavor. And we still find ourselves needing “someone to stand between us, someone to lay his hand upon us both.”

But the more things stay the same, the more they change. What Job could only ask for, we’ve been given! What Job needed, we have found!

Mr. Job, meet Jesus Christ. He is our advocate. He is our intercessor. He is the friend who pleads for us with God. He is the one who stands between us. He lays his hand upon us both. He is the middle man who has one foot on the ash heap and one foot in heaven. He is the only one to know what it is to be flesh and what it is to be God. He speaks in the tongues of men and of angels. He can put his hand on us and explain God. And he can lay his hand upon God and explain us. And because we have Jesus Christ, we can talk to God and know that he hears us. Because we have Jesus Christ, God speaks to us, and we are not overwhelmed.

I am thankful that Jesus came to earth. “We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who was tempted in every way, just as we are” (Heb 4:15). Because he lived, he can put his hand on us both. And I am thankful that Jesus died on the cross. “We were reconciled to God through the death of his Son” (Rom 5:10). Because he died, he can put his hand upon us both. And I am thankful that Jesus was resurrected. “By his power God raised [Jesus] from the dead, and he will raise us also” (1 Cor 6:14). Because he arose, Jesus can put his hand upon us both.

But there is more to the story of Jesus than that. The life, the death, the resurrection of Jesus Christ are God’s promise that conversation is always possible, that he will go to any length to keep the conversation going. But two thousand years ago was only the first installment of Jesus’ interceding work. It

bought Jesus the right to be our mediator. It permitted him to put one hand on God and one hand on us.

But there is more to the story of Jesus than that! For right now, Jesus has his hand on the shoulder of God, pleading for you and me (Heb 9:24). Jesus is standing at the right hand of God, interceding for us (Rom 8:34; Heb 7:25). At this very moment, he is speaking to the Father in our defense (1 John 2:1). He is acting as our high priest, entering heavenly places on our behalf (Heb 6:19–20).

And right now, Jesus has his hand on our shoulders. His Spirit is alive within us (Rom 8:9). His Spirit is teaching us the deep things of God this very moment (1 Cor 2:10). Even now, his Spirit is supporting us in our weakness and helping us to pray with groans that words cannot express (Rom 8:26). By that Spirit, we are able to cry out, “Abba, Father” tonight (Gal 4:6). With every breath, the Spirit of Jesus is filling us with power and hope and encouragement (Rom 5:5; 15:5, 13; Eph 3:16; 2 Tim 1:7). It’s not by accident we call that Spirit the “Comforter,” the “Intercessor,” the “Advocate.”

Jesus is busier, more active, working harder right now than at any time when he walked on the earth. His arms must be tired, stretched so often between heaven and earth.

But because we have a friend in Jesus, we can speak up before God. Because Jesus stands between us, there is room for words. All those things we’ve wanted to say to God, we can speak. Our questions, our complaints, our hard words—all find their voice through Jesus. That difficult, unsettling, risky, demanding conversation with God goes on—because Jesus stands between us.

Conclusion

That’s what I would like to tell Job’s wife. “I know you’ve had a hard time. I know you are hurting. I know you are angry with God. But don’t curse God. Don’t lapse into a sullen silence. Jesus can be your voice. He can speak for you and help you understand.”

That’s what I would like to tell Job’s friends. “Don’t tell people to curse themselves. Jesus takes us more seriously than that. He can handle all the messiness you are so afraid of. He knows we are but flesh, and still he defends us before the Father.”

And that’s what I would like to tell Job. “Your advocate has come. The one you asked for is here. Your friend who pleads with God has arrived. His name is Jesus Christ. And his hand is upon us both.”

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