

Job 19:23-27a

Oh, that my words were recorded, that they were written on a scroll, that they were inscribed with an iron tool on lead, or engraved in rock forever! I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another.

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| Cultural | Too many of us have a faith of utility | | |
| Theo-symbolic | Theodicy; Idolatry | Ontology | Tillich- Courage to Be |
| Semantic | Job's faith of utility was shattered (idol) | He still has faith in ultimate goodness and justice | Faith in God, not God's utility, is what grabs hold of us |
| Scriptural | Oh that my words were recorded | I know that my Redeemer lives | I will see God |

Focus sentence: Faith in God is not based on utility- we have faith in God because it grabs hold of us and doesn't let us go.

The Courage to Be

There's no way around it. This is a really hard passage of scripture, which is appropriate, given that it comes from what is probably the most difficult book in the entire Bible. Most of us are at least a little familiar with the story of Job. Here's a guy who's got it pretty good: land, livestock, children, all the signs of wealth in the ancient world. And then everything goes wrong--really wrong. God and Satan have a little bet concerning this guy and he has what amounts to the definition of a bad day. He loses his children, his livestock, his home, and then he gets struck with painful boils all over his body. So we find Job sitting on a dung-heap, scraping his sores with a shard of pottery. This sounds pretty bad, right? It can't get any worse for Job, can it? Is there anything worse than the physical and emotional suffering he's going through? Sadly, yes. As if all that's happened isn't bad enough, Job is also suffering spiritually.

You see, Job grew up believing that good things happen to good people. He believed that this was the way the world worked because he believed that this was the nature of God. If you made your sacrifices, if you worshiped God, if you worked hard and cared for your family, then God would prevent anything bad from happening to you. Job had faith that if he held up his end of the bargain, God would, too. But we can see that's not what happened. So in addition to the physical suffering from the boils, on top of the emotional suffering that came from losing his family and everything he'd spent his whole life working for, Job is also suffering because his concept of God, his understanding of the nature of God, is gone. Literally everything Job thought he knew has been proven wrong and perhaps this spiritual suffering was the most painful of all.

At this point I would expect Job to just give up--to roll over and die. Or perhaps he would take his wife's advice to curse God and die. Or perhaps he would listen to his friends who are insisting that God doesn't let bad things happen to good people and that Job must have done something wrong. Even though he knows he hasn't done anything wrong, he could have repented

anyway, just in case he forgot something. Or maybe Job could have done what many people do when they face the paradox of a good God and a world full of suffering: he could have just concluded that God doesn't exist.

Any of these options seem pretty reasonable in light of everything Job is experiencing, but he does something different, something unexpected. Job fights back. His friends come over and begin to try and reason with him. They argue that what they've always believed about God is still true: that God doesn't let this kind of thing happen to someone who is innocent, so you must be guilty of something, Job! But Job says, "No, I didn't. I know what we've always believed about God, but I'm innocent here. If anybody's at fault here," Job insists, "it's God!"

Job's faith in the idea that God will not let him suffer is shattered, but we discover that he still believes in some kind of standard of justice. Job believes that he will be vindicated and that God and everyone else will know that he is innocent. In this passage we find Job lamenting the injustice that's been done to him, crying out for someone to really hear and understand his innocence, and then he finally says something that shows us he has some hope left, after all. "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth." Job isn't quite sure what he believes about God. He's not sure that God is good or just. In fact he's wondering out loud if God is vindictive and he goes so far as to curse the day he was born. But Job still knows that God is there. All his reasons for believing in God and being faithful to God have been stripped away, and yet he still believes in God. At this point we can see that Job doesn't believe in God because of what faith will get him--because clearly he's not getting anything good. Job can't hold on to his old reasons for faith, and still we find that faith holds him.

Through Job's suffering we see him go on a kind of spiritual journey. He began with the belief that God's justice means that bad things won't happen to good people. When bad things happen to this very good person, he's forced to reexamine those beliefs. What he finds is a deeper conviction, not based on what he will get from God or certain ideas about God, but instead his conviction is rooted simply in the being of God. God simply IS, and as angry as Job is with God, and it's a righteous anger, Job can't get around the reality that God is the very ground of our being. God is not simply a part of reality, God is ultimate reality.

The great twentieth century theologian Paul Tillich talked about this very problem. He wrote extensively about what happens when we have an existential crisis: when life's tragedies send our concept of God into a tailspin. He addressed the question of just how we find the courage and the strength to keep on going when it seems that God has abandoned us. He concluded that, "The courage to be is rooted in the God who appears when God has disappeared in the anxiety of doubt." When all the ideas and concepts that make us feel secure have fallen away, when all the things that are so much less than God have failed us, when we are literally left with nothing, we are able to simply sit face to face with God. God does not cause our suffering, but God knows that it is when we are stripped down to nothing, it is when we are at our most vulnerable, that we are truly able to see his face.

If you find yourself in that place of suffering right now, if you feel stripped down to nothing, if it seems that God has abandoned you, please know that God is so much bigger than any idea or concept that we can have of him. Simply grow still and look for the face of God. Listen to him saying, "I know you're angry with me. That's OK. I know you don't understand what's going on. Just trust that I love you and I will carry you forward." Today let us rejoice in the good news that even in the worst of circumstances God holds on to us and gives us the courage to be. In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, Amen.