

Affliction (Job 2.1-3.1)

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‘In the realm of suffering’, writes Simone Weil, ‘affliction is something apart, specific, and irreducible. It is quite a different thing from simple suffering ... Affliction is an uprooting of life, a more or less attenuated equivalent of death ...’.¹ Tonight, in our series on the book of Job, we come to the moment when Job’s suffering becomes affliction. It’s a decisive turning point in the story.

As we began to see last week, the story of Job is an extraordinary work of biblical literature which wrestles with the relationship between God, suffering, and the possibility of authentic faith. The action is premised on an imagined wager, a bet, between God and Satan. The character of Satan wagers that Job is devoted to God only because he’s been prosperous, successful, respectable. Satan reckons that if things start to go wrong for Job, he’ll soon curse God to his face. The character of God, on the other hand, is willing to bet that Job’s faith is more disinterested than that, that he will continue faithful whatever happens, because he loves God for God’s own sake. So God, in the imagination of this story, allows Satan to cause Job to suffer – to lose all his wealth, his possessions, even his children – to test how he will respond. And Job responds – amazingly – with worship. He mourns his loss, he suffers pain, but he accepts it all. He says, ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord’. In all that happened, we’re told, ‘Job did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing’.

¹ Simone Weil, *Waiting on God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1973), pp.117, 118.

This week's reading opens just as last week's did – the stage is set in the heavenly court, there's another fateful debate between God and Satan. God is once more boasting in Job's integrity, how he's passed the test. But Satan says: no wonder he's hung in there with you. Nothing has affected him closely enough yet. But let him be touched in his bone and his flesh; then I bet he'll curse you to your face. OK – says the Lord, give it your best shot, 'he's in your power'. So, Satan went out 'and inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head'. In the Muslim tradition of this story, Job is said to have been 'struck with a filthy disease, his body being full of worms, and so offensive, that as he lay on the dunghill none could bear to come near him'.²

We need to understand something of the context in which the story arose to feel the full force of this. In the world of the bible, skin disease of any kind, up to and including leprosy, was not only a painful and distressing physical ailment, but it rendered you spiritually and morally unclean. Anyone suspected of being diseased had to go to a priest for examination (Leviticus 13. 2-3). If found to be infected, according to the book of Leviticus, the one 'who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, "Unclean, unclean". He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp' (Leviticus 13. 45-46).

What this means is that the one diseased is, *by definition*, a sinner. He's considered a sinner because he's diseased. But since he's diseased, and therefore untouchable, he's forbidden to attend worship. He's unable to perform the rituals necessary to be cleansed of his sin, or put himself right with God. So it's the ultimate double-bind. You're sinful, so you can't come to church. But because you can't come to church, you're stuck in your sin. It leaves the so-called 'sinner' without possibility of

² Marvin H. Pope, *Job: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1973), p.22.

communal and religious belonging unless somehow the disease just goes away by itself. So the leper is condemned to a kind of social and spiritual death and it's this, says Weil, which is the essence of affliction. Affliction is the kind of suffering which compromises your very identity, your sense of being a human being among others, inhabiting a world that has some gentleness, some integrity, coherence and security.

At first, it seems as though Job might be able to accept even this. His wife (herself now doubtless sharing his status as outcast) incites him to curse God, yet still he refuses to 'sin with his lips'. 'Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?' he says (Job 2.10). His friends come to console him and, appalled at his suffering which 'was very great', they are silenced. They sit with him on the ground for seven days and seven nights. But by the time Job speaks again it's no longer possible for him to contain what has befallen him. '[He] opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth' (3.1). His sense of his life and of God in his life has collapsed under the weight of his suffering.

The genius and power of the book of Job is that it faces up to the possibility of this extremity of human experience. It is possible, Weil says, that a human being can be struck by a blow that leaves them 'struggling on the ground like a half-crushed worm', barely feeling human, cut off from all that once gave sense and purpose.³ And this becomes the ultimate test for any talk of God, any talk of meaning in human life, and any conception of what authentic, non-falsifying faith might be. It's little wonder that the book of Job is a primary resource for Jewish theology after the Holocaust.

Too much of our religious talk refuses to acknowledge this possibility of unmerited, catastrophic suffering. As Job's friends will try to insist, surely Job has done *something* to deserve it, *something* to bring this calamity on himself. Surely, he has sinned in some way? Because if he hasn't, that means that any of us are vulnerable to

³ Weil, *Waiting on God*, p.120.

the same kind of calamity. It could be us – and that’s way too confronting to admit. The ‘weightiest criticisms of Christian speech and practice amount to this’, remarks Rowan Williams: ‘that Christian language ... fails to transform the world’s meaning because it neglects or trivializes or evades aspects of the human’, and especially ‘the abiding reality of unhealed and meaningless suffering’.⁴

For Job himself, at this point, the only way out is through. Even though his faith never was a simple prosperity doctrine – even though he never expected his righteousness to guarantee his security, nevertheless for him some basic sense of ‘contract’ with the universe has been broken. His implicit expectation of meaning and order has been revealed by events to be illusory, at some level falsifying. This can befall us for many reasons – a natural disaster, the tragic and unexpected death of a loved one, a revelation about our own past, a betrayal or failure. And once that contract is broken, it can never be recovered in the same way, at the same level.

If Job is to find a way to go on, a way of continuing to live with integrity – that is, oriented towards wholeness – then he must break through to a new identity, a new knowledge of God which will bring with it a new kind of integrity. As we’ll see, this is a long, painful and difficult process, and one that has implications not just for Job, but for all our theology, for all the ways that we too conceive of our lives, practise our faith and undergo God.

⁴ Rowan Williams, ‘The Judgement of the World’, in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), pp.29-43, p.40.