

Empathy: How Not To Minister To The Broken

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Job 3

In his book, *Disappointment with God*, Phillip Yancey tells the story of Richard, whose struggles in life and the confusion they produced are not as uncommon as we might think.

Richard was converted to Christ while in college. Not long after that, his parents announced they were getting a divorce. Notwithstanding Richard's fervent prayers for the preservation of their marriage, they split. This was his first experience of feeling let down by God. Every decision he made in life was preceded by prayer and Bible study. But everything he did seemed to backfire. A lucrative job offer was withdrawn and given to someone less qualified. He soon found himself in debt, his fiancé jilted him, and he began to experience a series of physical problems. Finally, feeling that he had reached his wit's end, he decided to seek God in an all-night prayer vigil. He fasted and prayed and zealously sought the Lord. But all he heard was silence. Nothing. After it was over, he said: *"I staked my life on God, and God let me down."*

Three questions plagued Richard and nearly drove him to despair.

First, "Is God unfair?" Yancey explains: "Richard had tried to follow God, but his life fell apart anyway. He could not reconcile his miseries with the biblical promises of rewards and happiness. And what about the people who openly deny God yet prosper anyway? This is an old complaint, as old as Job and the Psalms, but it remains a stumbling block to faith."

Second, "Is God silent?" Says Yancey, "Three times, as he faced crucial choices in his education, career, and romance, Richard begged God for clear direction. Each time he thought he had God's will figured out, only to have that choice lead to failure. 'What kind of Father is he?' Richard asked. 'Does he enjoy watching me fall on my face? I was told that God loves me and has a wonderful plan for my life. Fine. So why doesn't he tell me what that plan is?'"

Finally, "Is God hidden?" This question, above all, haunted and obsessed Richard. "It seemed to him an irreducible minimum, a theological bottom line, that God should somehow prove himself: 'How can I have a relationship with a Person I'm not even sure exists?' Yet it seemed that God deliberately hid himself, even from people who

sought him out. And when Richard's late-night vigil provoked no response, he simply gave up on God" (36).

The result comes as no surprise: *depression, bordering on despair*. Job, too, was depressed. The foundations of his personal and cosmic moral order had been severely shaken, almost destroyed (recall what happened to him in chps. 1-2). His emotions are now raw, deep, and at times terrifying. We will soon see in Job violent grief, explosive spiritual agony, despondency, and a haunting cry of pain. There is yet to come, lament, complaint, and malediction. Job inches ever more closely to cursing God for what has happened, but he stops just short of crossing the line.

He is confused, frustrated, and disappointed, not unlike Richard. And he is mad! He says, in effect,

"My *past* is destroyed, left in a rubble on the desert plains."

"My *present* is filled with physical and emotional pain beyond words."

"My *future* is hopeless. Better death than this kind of life."

We can see the depths of Job's anguish by noting the progression of his lament:

"Would that I might never have been conceived."

"If conceived, would that I might never have been born."

"If born, would that I might have died at birth."

"If I live, would that I might die a premature death."

Thus we are suddenly plunged from the epic grandeur of Job's response in chapters 1-2 into the dramatic turmoil of chapter 3; from the external description of his suffering in chapters 1-2 to his internal experience in chapter 3.

It is as if Job says to God, "I recognize and acknowledge your sovereign right to deal with your creatures as you see fit, and I'm not saying you have sinned by letting me suffer. But I *still* don't know *why* you do it! To what end is this suffering? For what purpose have you allowed it?"

Job isn't arguing a theological point in this chapter, but is simply trying to understand his experience. He talks to himself, gives vent to his feelings and frustrations and confusion. He isn't always correct in what he says, so we must be careful not to build a theological position on everything he says. But at least he's honest, which is better than a series of religious cliches that are far removed from reality.

A. *Lamenting his Birth—3:1-10*

v. 1

Job breaks the silence and his friends are probably relieved that he, and not they, speaks first. What they undoubtedly expected from his was a confession of sin. What they actually heard shocked and dismayed them. Firmly committed to an inflexible doctrine of retribution and reward, they feel obligated to straighten out his thinking.

Contrast Job's attitude toward his birthday with yours and mine! "Would that the whole of my life be annihilated! Nothing I've experienced up to this point is worth suffering like this."

vv. 2-3

He invokes a curse against the two events that made life possible: birth (3a) and conception (3b). See Ps. 51:5 for an example of mentioning birth before conception. Job moves backwards from his present state to his birth to conception. "Like a messenger who brings bad tidings, night is cursed for the message it delivers, though it is hardly responsible" (Clines, 82).

His wish is not suicidal, though, because his words do not lead to his death. It is similar to other exclamations in Scripture:

"If it is thus with me, why do I live" (Gen. 25:22; Rebekah).

"It is enough, now, O Lord; take away my life" (1 Kings 19:4; Elijah).

"Take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live" (Jonah 4:3).

See esp. Jeremiah 20:14-18.

v. 4

Job seeks to reverse the very words of God in Gen. 1:3 ("let there be light!"). On the day of his birth, may it be said: "Let there be darkness!" The idea was that any day which remained in darkness would never come into being. Note the piling up of words for darkness in vv. 4-6 ... "Let God not attend to or care for that day, thus guaranteeing its death."

v. 5

He continues his curse by charging the powers of darkness to claim or seize the day of his birth. If they hold it fast, it would cease to exist. “May a massive cloud of darkness cover it, snuffing out any ray of light.”

vv. 6-7

In view of his suffering, he wishes that the night of his conception might never have been. (1) v. 6—If the deep gloom of darkness had, as it were, seized or abducted that night so that evening would not have given way to daylight, that 24 hour period would have forever been expunged from the calendar. One thinks of February 29th of “leap year” which comes only once every four years. If you were born on that day you don’t have a birthday to celebrate. You must use Feb. 28th or March 1st. It is as if Job wishes it were always so for him. (2) v. 7—Job’s curse is to rob the night of his conception of all fertility. “May my mother’s womb be as barren and stony as rock, or as soil that cannot yield a crop.”

v. 8

Job wishes that this night had been put under a spell or had been declared an “unlucky” day by magicians or astrologers so that he would not have been conceived. “Leviathan” was a seven-headed sea beast in ancient mythology which caused eclipses by swallowing the sun or the moon. “May the sorcerers conjure up Leviathan to swallow up the light and darkness of my birthday, that it might not be.”

vv. 9-10

Venus and Mercury shine brightly at dawn and announce the beginning of new day. Job declares a curse on them, to prevent the day of his birth from arriving. Again, in v. 10 he curses the day of his birth because it did not prevent his mother from conceiving or giving birth.

B. *Lamenting his life—3:11-19*

Would that he be transported from womb to tomb! The “knees” here are his father’s who, by taking him on his lap, legitimizes his birth. He wishes that he had been discarded and left unattended and unnourished and thus left to die. For if he had died he would be better off, not because death offers joys but because it ends the miseries of life. In the grave, says Job, earthly social structures that allow one man to lord it over another, to exploit and harm another, are no more. No more injustice whereby the rich take advantage of the poor, where the powerful terrorize the weak, where masters dominate their servants. Strife and turmoil between unequal human being is at an end. “Would that I were there,” laments Job.

C. *Wishing for death—3:20-26*

vv. 20–22

He voices his confusion: Why should the result of God’s gift of life be that those who have it wish to be rid of it? He says, in effect, “God, I’m not cursing you for sustaining life in those who suffer. But I don’t understand why you do it and I wish you wouldn’t!”

v. 23

Here Job is referring to himself. God has “hedged” him in yet again, but this time with different results. Cf. 1:10. What was originally looked on as a blessing is now a curse. The hedge used to protect him from harm. Now it keeps out the help he so desperately needs. Perhaps the “hedge” is a reference to God sustaining his life. For a man who wants to die, God’s sustaining his life is a hostile and constrictive act. “God, pull the plug on me!”

vv. 24–26

A normal life is sustained by food and drink, but all that Job consumes are sighs and groans. His worst fears and greatest dread each day come to pass.

Concluding observations:

- (1) Job never contemplates suicide. Although he doesn’t take his own life, he wishes that God would.
- (2) He never demands the restoration of his health and wealth as if they were his by right or merit.
- (3) He never curses God.
- (4) His experience demonstrates to us that even the most godly and faithful of believers can be discouraged, depressed, and on the verge of despair. Cf. 2 Cor. 1:8–9.
- (5) Discouragement and depression can cause us to lose perspective. They warp our point of view. Don’t make important decisions in such a state of mind.

Let’s return for a moment to Richard. When asked the three questions at the beginning of this lesson, he replied: “Well, my doubt was more like a feeling—I felt jilted, like God had strung me along just to watch me fall. But you’re right, as I think about it; those questions were behind my feelings. God was certainly unfair. And he always seemed hidden, and silent. Yeah, that’s it. That’s it exactly! Why on earth doesn’t God answer those questions? If only God had answered those questions—if only he answered *one* of them. If, say, he would just speak aloud one time so that everyone could hear, then I would believe. Probably the whole world would believe. Why doesn’t he?”

Job 4-7

All of us join in affirming both the goodness and greatness of God. But that does not mean we are able to explain everything that our good and great God either causes or permits. Whether it is a terrorist bomb that destroys innocent human life or the swindling of the elderly or the diagnosis of cancer in a single mom, much in our world is beyond our ability to understand. One author put it this way:

“Unfairness is no easier for us to swallow today than it was for Job thousands of years ago. Consider the most common curse word in the English language: ‘God’ followed by the word ‘damn.’ People say it not only in the face of great tragedy, but also when their cars won’t start, when a favored sports team loses, when it rains on their picnic. That oath renders an instinctive judgment that life *ought* to be fair and that God should somehow ‘do a better job’ of running his world” (Yancey, 177).

That same author then goes on to make this point:

“The reason the Book of Job seems so modern is that for us, too, the facts do not add up. Job’s strident message of life’s unfairness seems peculiarly suited to our own pain-racked century. Simply plug contemporary illustrations into his arguments: ... starving children in the Third World; faithful pastors imprisoned in South Africa; Christian leaders who die in their prime; Mafia dons and spoiled entertainers who profit obscenely from flouting God’s rules; the millions in Western Europe who live quiet, happy lives and never give God a thought. Far from fading away, Job’s questions about this world’s unfairness have only grown louder and shriller. We still expect a God of love and power to follow certain rules on earth. Why doesn’t he?” (178).

Job’s three friends insisted that God does, in point of fact, follow certain rules, and that these rules admit of no exception. One rule in particular is the law of retribution and reward. If you are good, so goes the rule, you will be rewarded. But if you are bad, you will suffer retribution that is proportionate to your sins. Job’s friends came to him convinced that they understood God’s ways perfectly.

The confidence of Job’s “friends” reminds me of a story of a man who found his little boy feverishly at work drawing a picture with his many colorful crayons. “What are you drawing, son?” “God,” the little boy replied, without hesitation. “But no one knows what God looks like,” said his dad. “They will when I get finished!”

Job’s friends were convinced they knew the character of God better than anyone and that their interpretation of why Job was suffering was the orthodox one. On the one hand, Job was fortunate to have friends who would take the time and put out the effort to comfort him in his trials. Faithful, loyal, loving friends are hard to come by. “Many a man claims to have unflinching love, but a faithful man, who can find?” (Prov. 20:6). Job’s friends were

indeed faithful, loyal, and loving. But unfortunately they were handicapped by a faulty theological perspective that led them to say things which proved more painful to Job than even the boils on his body. Their viewpoint simply assumed that sin and suffering are *always* inexorably bound together in a cause/effect relationship. Whenever and wherever there is one, there is the other. Notwithstanding what they knew to be true about Job's character, they refused to budge. They refused to allow the possibility that on occasion, as mysterious as it might seem, a righteous man might suffer greatly.

If this advice had come from his enemies, Job might not have been so bothered by it. But the fact that it came from his friends made it especially difficult to endure (cf. Ps. 55:12-14). Nothing cuts so deeply as a friend, someone on whom you thought you could rely, who throws cold water on the flickering flame of hope. When that happens we feel deflated, demotivated, and discouraged.

Beginning with chapter 4 and extending through chapter 37 is a cycle of speeches in which Job and his counselors engage in often heated debate. Of his friends, Eliphaz and Bildad both deliver three speeches, while Zophar speaks only twice. Job replied at length to each of their speeches. A fourth figure addresses Job in chapters 32-37. His name is Elihu. The remainder of the book contains God's reply to Job and Job's response. One characteristic of these speeches is that they start out relatively soft and become increasingly hard. The counsel of Job's friends is at first moderately kind and tolerant. But as Job persists in rejecting their advice, they themselves lose their patience and become progressively more intense, less courteous, and more critical. Eliphaz, being the first to speak, is probably the elder statesman of the group. He is more eloquent than the others and thus leads the way.

Before reading and interacting with their words of counsel, it would be wise to take note of God's evaluation of their advice. See Job 42:7-9.

Eliphaz's First Speech (Job 4-5)

A. *An uneasy mixture of consolation and rebuke—4:1-6*

At first, Eliphaz seems nervous and a bit conciliatory. He makes an attempt to be tactful and consoling. He doesn't openly accuse Job of sin but states general principles that he hopes will lead Job himself to make his confession of moral failure. Contrast his opening speech with later, more strident comments in 15:1-6 and 22:1-5.

vv. 1-2

Eliphaz fears Job is unable to bear what he has to say and doesn't want to add unnecessarily to his friend's grief. Note his opening query: "Will you be offended?" (RSV), "Will you mind?" (NASB), "Will you lose patience?" (NEB). Eliphaz politely asks Job's indulgence before offering his advice.

vv. 3–5

Eliphaz begins with praise of Job’s selfless, sacrificial ministry to others in the past. Job apparently knew how to minister to those who suffered and had done it frequently before. Eliphaz suggests that Job must now practice what he preaches! The time has come for him to apply his own wisdom to his own case. “It’s time to take your own medicine, Job, and live up to your own standards.”

v. 6

Here we see the underlying theological assumption that explains Eliphaz’s perspective on suffering. Piety, moral blamelessness and the fear of God will, in the long run, guarantee for oneself God’s favor and deliverance. If you have truly been righteous, you have every reason to believe that God will relieve you of this pitiful condition. Eliphaz’s theology leaves no room for a Job, for a man who is righteous yet has no grounds for confidence and whose piety has led him only to despair.

B. The doctrine of retribution—4:7–11

One gets the impression that Eliphaz’s voice suddenly becomes intense, that he sits up straight and perhaps begins to wave his finger in Job’s face. Verses 7–9 are especially explicit:

Simply put, good, God-fearing people don’t die prematurely. This doctrine, be it noted, is unfalsifiable. That is to say, one can never prove it wrong, for every incident of premature death is taken as proof of personal wickedness. This statement by Eliphaz is also cruel, for it implicitly attributes the death of Job’s ten children to their own sin. The “law” to which Eliphaz appeals is that you reap what you sow. If you are reaping evil (as Job was), it can only be because you previously sowed evil. Eliphaz and others like him are driven to this conclusion because *it is always easier to accuse someone of sin than to adjust one’s view of God.*

C. Eliphaz’s Vision—4:12–21

1. Its description—vv. 12–16
2. Its content—v. 17
3. Its interpretation—vv. 18–21

The point is that, “If God doesn’t entirely trust his angels, who are constantly in his presence, what makes you think you will fare any better? After all, Job, you are made from the clay of the ground; you are frail and prone to sin.” In a word, Job is a mortal creature. His life can be snuffed out with the ease with which a moth is crushed. You are constantly

exposed to sudden and unpredictable death. You may die and no one even notice. You are like a tent in which the pulling up of its pegs results in collapse. And you may die without ever gaining wisdom about the meaning of life or the reason for your death.

D. *The absence of a mediator—5:1-7*

No one, not even the angels, can release you from the inevitable consequences of your sin. Says Eliphaz, “Let me tell you something about the foolish man who in response to his suffering becomes resentful and bitter and envious of others. He dies. It will kill him. In fact, I’ve seen it actually happen. He seems to prosper for a while (‘taking root’—v. 3), but eventually it all falls apart.” Again, although Eliphaz does not directly refer to Job’s children, the statement that “the children are far from safety” must have cut deeply into his heart.

What happened to the fool occurred because of what he himself did. Suffering is not natural or an impersonal process like vegetation or weeds. It is not “nature” that is the source of suffering, says Eliphaz, but men like you, Job. Just as surely as sparks fly upward, a man who is a sinner will breed trouble and turmoil for himself.

E. *An exhortation that Job appeal to God—5:8-16*

Says Eliphaz, “Job, do you know what **I** would do if I were you? I would seek a hearing with God.” Give Eliphaz credit at least for acknowledging the sovereignty of God!

F. *A feeble attempt at encouragement—5:17-27*

Here Eliphaz says that suffering is not always the inevitable consequence of human imperfection, but can sometimes be the positive act of God who wants to educate and strengthen the sinner. If you are willing to accept the fact that you do, in fact, deserve it, it will be of consolation to you. But that is precisely what Job cannot accept! “How can he accept God’s chastening if for him his suffering is not chastening but rank injustice?” (Clines, 147).

Job’s First Speech (Job 6-7)

A. *Job defends his right to complain—6:1-7*

Job is not in the least sobered or quieted by Eliphaz’s counsel. Eliphaz warned Job about a bad temper, in effect saying: “Watch your temper. Your sin has already got you in enough trouble as it is. Don’t make things worse by getting mad at God” (5:2). Says Job: “But I’ve got every right to be upset!” Job’s cry is for understanding: “If only you could recognize the burden of my suffering, you would understand the violence of my language!”

Job wishes there were a dramatic way of demonstrating visibly the enormity of his agony:

Job appeals to the image of huge scale, with two trays balanced from a center pole. On one tray Job puts his suffering, his vexation, his misery. On the other he places his sins. The former, suggests Job, would outweigh the latter. Indeed, his suffering would outweigh all the sand of the sea. His suffering, in other words, is utterly out of proportion to his sins.

For the first time in v. 4 Job explicitly names God as the ultimate cause of his suffering. He knows it isn't because of his guilt. He agrees with Eliphaz that trouble is not self-generating (cf. 5:6-7). Thus there can only be one explanation: God did it. Job compares God to the expert marksman who has shot a rain of arrows into him. "I am but God's target." Like a general marshalling a mighty army against a city, God has arrayed against him an army of terrors. "The same horror that occupants of a besieged city feel floods Job's soul" (Hartley, 132). What really hurts Job isn't so much the physical pain as the realization that he appears to have become God's enemy ... "and I don't know why!"

In vv. 5-7 Job asks a series of rhetorical questions. The point is this: "As long as animals receive the food appropriate to them, they don't complain. You don't hear a peep out of them. I'm no different," says Job. "But here I experience what I don't deserve and you expect me to remain silent? If the donkey doesn't get his grass or the ox its fodder you would never hear the end of their complaining. Here I am being served up unjustified anguish and you won't even give me the understanding you would grant a dumb ox!"

Just as any sane person would reject tasteless food, Job refuses to swallow the bitter pill God has given him.

B. Job's despair in suffering—6:8-13

Job wishes that God would activate the oath he uttered in chapter three and crush him. If God were compassionate, says Job, "He would crush me; he could do it as effortlessly as a weaver snips off a piece of thread." Clearly Job rejects suicide as an option. If he is to die, it must come at God's hand, not his own. In v. 10 Job appears to say, "If God would let me die now, at least I would derive some joy in knowing that I had lived faithfully and not done as my wife counseled. Let me die, before I weaken and curse you. My only joy in this pain is in knowing I went to my grave without cursing God."

C. Job's disappointment with his friends—6:14-23

Cf. Prov. 25:19. Job accuses them of falling short in their "loyal love" to him. This is tantamount to their abandoning their fear of God. In other words, "If you really feared God, you would honor your covenant of friendship with me and support me in my suffering."

Job's imagery in vv. 15-17 is vivid. A "wadi" was a river-bed in the desert which during rainy season overflows, often because of melting snow that floods it and transforms it into a muddy torrent. However, during the summer it dries up. Job's point is: "You three

overflow with kindness during the good times, when I'm not really in need. But when the heat of trial and tragedy comes, you dry up; you aren't dependable. You offer me a drink when I'm not thirsty but nothing when I'm truly in need."

In vv. 18–21 Job compares his own disappointment at their unreliability with the experience of thirsty travelers who find the wadi dried up. Those who travel in caravans are tempted to leave the regular path in search of water. They go off into unfamiliar parts of the desert and find only dry stream-beds. "That's how I feel!" shouts Job. "I am like a thirsty member of a traveling caravan standing before a dried-up stream. You have no life-giving, refreshing waters to offer me."

"It's not as if I've asked for a whole lot from you guys," he says in vv. 22–23. "I never asked for money. I never demanded that you pay a king's ransom to deliver me from captivity. You haven't had to risk your lives or anything like that. All I want is a little understanding. Instead, I get rebuked!"

D. *Job defers to their counsel—6:24–30*

Here Job says,

"Don't beat around the bush any longer. If I've sinned, come right out and say so. Be specific. My life is an open book. Good counsel is painfully honest. But your words have proven nothing. They are worthless. You want me to listen to your counsel but you treat my words like empty wind. You are like those who use the judicial system to their own advantage to squeeze the most out of someone who is in their debt, however innocent they may be. At least have the courage to look me squarely in the face and tell me where I've sinned, if you really believe I have."

E. *Job's response to God—7:1–21*

If these words are not spoken directly to God, they are at least spoken in God's direction; they are for God's hearing.

1. *Job's lament—vv. 1–6*

Here he compares his life to the hardship borne by the hired worker: "He may not get much, but at least the hired man gets something for his hardship. And even the slave can look forward to the cool of the evening and a good night's sleep. But not me," laments Job. "It is as if I've worked for months and futility is my wage. I can't even rest at night."

To make matters worse, he suffers from insomnia. He tosses and turns, his mind wondering when it will be time to get up. The night passes so slowly as he is conscious of every pain in his body.

2. Job's prayer—vv. 7–21

Here Job reflects on the brevity of his life. In his pathetic condition it does not appear he will live much longer. He desires once again to experience the joys of normal life before he dies. Would that God might take note of his condition and restore him.

Verse 11 raises the distinction between “complaining” and “cursing”. The former maintains faith while not understanding how it is compatible with one’s suffering. The latter renounces faith altogether. It is the difference between *confused frustration* and *defiant bitterness*.

The background to v. 12 is the ancient myth of the sea monster that was the embodiment of chaos and evil. According to the story, God waged war against the monster (i.e., evil) and tamed (defeated) it. Job says, “Am I regarded by you as an enemy, perhaps the sea-beast, that must be kept under guard? Surely I am not that big of a problem to you, am I?”

In these verses Job expresses amazement that he should be so much the focus of God’s attention. In Psalm 8 the psalmist expresses amazement that God has so highly honored man. It amazes him that puny man could be the object of God’s concern. What the psalmist finds a marvelous delight, Job finds as an unwelcome intrusion: “Would that you might just leave me alone!”

Literally, “leave me alone until I swallow my spit!” (v. 19b). In other words, “Wait a minute!”

Can the alleged sin of one dying man be so harmful to God that He must devote so much of his divine energy to harass him? Job asks, in effect, “Why have you allowed yourself to become so obsessed with me that I’ve become a burden to you?” “Is not God’s preoccupation with Job ... totally disproportionate to Job’s significance?” (Clines, 194).

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