

Mrs. Job – Lessons from Secondhand Suffering

When Lightning Strikes – Part VI

Job 2:9-10

Introduction

A store has recently opened in New York City that sells husbands, if you can imagine it, so that a woman can come to the store and choose a husband – according to the story that I recently received from someone, obviously tongue-in-cheek. Among the instructions at the entrance to this store are a description of the way the store operates and the warning, “You may visit the store only once.”

There are six floors in all, in this store, and the attributes of the men increase as the shopper goes to higher floors. There is a catch, however – the shopper may choose any man from a particular floor or choose to go up to a higher floor, but they cannot go back down except to exit the building.

One woman finally decided to give the store a try and went to find a husband. She walked in the lobby doors and ahead of her, on another set of doors, was a sign that read, “The men on this first floor have jobs and love the Lord.”

She thought, “I’ll try the second floor.”

The elevator doors opened and a sign on the door just across the hallway read, “These potential husbands have jobs, love the Lord, and love kids.”

“That’s pretty good,” she thought, “but I’ll try one floor up.”

On the third floor, the sign said, “These men have well-paying jobs, love the Lord, love kids, and are extremely good looking.”

“Oh my,” she thought, but felt compelled to keep going.

She went up to the fourth floor and the sign read, “These men have well-paying jobs, love the Lord, really love kids, are extremely good looking, and have a consistent romantic streak.”

“Mercy me!” she thought, “Should I settle for one of these? Oh, but what might be on the fifth floor?”

She traveled up and the sign read, “These men have great paying jobs, love the Lord, really love kids, are extremely good looking, have a sensitive romantic streak, and love to cook and do housework.”

“Wow!” she thought, and was tempted to stay and choose right then and there.

However, she pressed on, breathlessly, to the top floor. The elevators opened and a sign just across the hallway read, “There are no men on this floor; this floor exists solely as proof that women are impossible to please.”

I did not think that was funny!

I am in trouble with all the ladies now! I promise, for the rest of today, to only say encouraging things.

What if you could pick your mate for life by knowing ahead of time all the attributes about him or her? You could shop for the best deal.

What if, in fact, you knew what was coming just around the corner in life? Would it make it easier to decide what to do or not to do?

The truth of the matter is that there is no way to avoid the challenges of life. Life is actually more difficult and dangerous than we even expect.

When I marry a young couple, I often choke with emotion at that prayer of dedication because I know we are dedicating a home where neither of them knows the joys and the sorrows that are ahead. This is the reason it is so important to dedicate them to God.

I came across some research recently in my study. More than likely, you have been exposed to something very dangerous – and you probably did not even know it.

Up to one million young people are affected with a variety of physical ailments because of it – including respiratory tract infections, asthma, and middle ear infections. Some children even experience permanent hearing loss because of it.

In adults, it is responsible for cancer and heart diseases. In fact, 50,000 deaths occur because of it every year.

What makes it especially troubling is that the victims never personally did anything to bring this about – they just happened to be exposed to it. This is the reason fourteen states have now passed laws to get rid of it in public places. Nine states have made sure it never shows up in work places and restaurants.

If you have not guessed by now, this culprit is simply called, “secondhand smoke”.

In the 1980s, the cigarette company Philip Morris conducted research that proved secondhand smoke was highly toxic. However, the company suppressed the findings during the next twenty years.

Now the truth is out. The Surgeon General actually reported that there is no such thing as a risk-free level of exposure to secondhand smoke.

By 2005, research had confirmed that secondhand smoke is responsible for 200,000 annual cases of respiratory tract infections in two year olds and under. Secondhand smoke causes 15,000 hospitalizations every year; it is the reason for half-a-million asthma attacks and 1.6 million visits to the doctor’s office every year.¹

These are people who suffer, not because they ever touched a cigarette or a cigar or a pipe – not even once; they just lived with someone who did; they just rode in a car with someone who did; they ate next to someone who did.

Even a brief exposure to secondhand smoke, science has now proven, makes the blood platelets become stickier. The lining of blood vessels is damaged, coronary flow is decreased, and many more

things occur from even a brief exposure to secondhand smoke.ⁱⁱ

The purpose of my sermon is not to get those who smoke to quit – though if it does, great! You can lay your cigarettes and cigars up here on the pulpit stage after the service. However, that would only be the secondhand purpose of my message.

It is fascinating to me that we can become deeply concerned about the affects of secondhand smoke – states even pass laws to deal with it. The presence of germs; the avoidance of stress in the workplace; safe working conditions, and so on, get a lot of attention.

However, there is little evidence observed or effort demonstrated against something that is far more devastating and destructive and life-altering; something far more life-threatening and dangerous and debilitating than secondhand smoke. I would like to call it, “secondhand suffering”.

Millions upon millions of people are affected adversely by it every single year. It is the cause of physical difficulties beyond number. It fills bed after bed in hospitals and doctors, counselors, and psychologists offices every single year by the millions. No laws have ever been passed to get rid of it. No science can ever eradicate it. No medicine can fully get rid of its affects.

Secondhand suffering is suffering brought on in the lives of people who are exposed to those who are suffering. The Bible offers the only help and the only hope.

Review

When we last left our study in Job, he was sitting at the city dump – on the heap of ashes left by the burning of garbage and refuse. There he sat in utter and total agony, scratching himself with a broken piece of pottery in an attempt to rid himself of his awful itching.

Job and his wife had no idea that these events would be a part of their future when they married, perhaps thirty to forty years earlier. Their lives were turned upside down.

Job was now suffering from a long list of physical ailments and discomforts that included:

- ulcerous sores (2:7);
- persistent itching (2:8);
- inability to eat (3:24);
- overwhelming dread and fear at times (3:25);
- insomnia (7:4);

- worms in his open sores (7:5);
- cracked and oozing skin (7:5);
- difficulty breathing (9:18);
- dark circles around his eyes (16:16);
- weight loss (19:20; 33:21);
- constant high fever and aching joints (30:28, 30);
- constant, continual pain (30:16, 17).

Job was living a physical nightmare. He had moved out of the house and into the town dump where the other beggars and lepers lived, in so much agony that he did not really want to be around anyone else.

Add to this the fact that his name would become a mockery and people would talk about nothing other than Job. This was the man they thought lived for God, but evidently he was living a sinful, secret life and God was now judging him severely.

What gets lost in all of this is the only other family member, besides Job, who was left alive. She has already suffered much, but she will suffer yet further indirectly, as she watches her husband suffer.

If Job is the epitome of suffering, she then becomes the epitome of secondhand suffering. Both are deadly to one's faith and trust in the sovereign goodness of God.

We will call her Mrs. Job.

Mrs. Job – A Secondhand Sufferer

Rabbinical tradition believes that Mrs. Job was Dinah, the daughter of Jacob. The evidence is strong that Job lived during the days of the patriarchs, but there is only weak evidence that his wife was Jacob's daughter.

Other tradition holds that one of Dinah's daughters, evidently later born to Job and Dinah, moved to Egypt and was the one who became the wife of Joseph when he was elevated to prime minister.

We do not know any of this for certain. It grows mysterious because there is little to glean about this woman who was Job's wife.

We do know that Mrs. Job appears briefly in Job chapter 2. This takes place after Job has moved out of the house and into the city garbage dump, where, for some time, he has been suffering all of his physical ailments. Notice Job 2:9.

Then his wife said to him, "Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die!"

One translator translates this, "Renounce God, and die." Another words it, "Bid farewell to God, and die." In other words, "Turn your back on God, get rid of your testimony of faith, which is the only thing keeping you alive, and let God put you to death."ⁱⁱⁱ

Mrs. Job is saying, "It is obvious that God has given up on you, so why don't you give up on God!"

Some might picture her as a conniving serpentine. Calvin believed she was spurred on by the devil to tempt her husband. Augustine believed she was the devil's accomplice, allowed to live only so he could induce her to tempt her husband to curse God.

We are not told. However, after all the research and language work I could do, I personally do not believe that she was trying to get Job to sin – I believe she was trying to end Job's suffering.

The Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, called the Septuagint, was translated in the third and second centuries before Christ. While the Septuagint is not inspired scripture, it is interesting that the apostle Paul and even our Lord quoted from it during their ministries. In the Septuagint, Mrs. Job has a much longer speech that she delivers to Job, which perhaps gives us some insight on what drove her to suggest he end his life by renouncing God. It reads,

When a long time had passed, [she asked], "How long will you endure, saying, 'Behold, I will wait yet for a little time, looking for the hope of my salvation.'? Behold, the memory of you has been blotted out from the earth, [our] sons and daughters, the travail and pain of my womb, whom with toil I reared for nothing. And yet you yourself sit in the decay of worms, passing the nights under the open sky, while I am a wanderer . . . from place to place and from house to house, waiting until the sun goes down, so that I may rest from my toils and from the pains that now grip me."

Later, the text records that she goes through the humiliation of cutting off her hair and selling it in order to buy some bread.^{iv}

In other words, "All is lost; we're finished; there's no way back; God has renounced us . . . Oh Job, I can't stand to see the way you suffer. Renounce God and be released from your terrible misery."

We cannot defend the course Mrs. Job recommends to her husband, but we can understand.

Lessons from secondhand suffering

As I have been immersed in this text for some time, I have made several observations about those who endure secondhand suffering, or suffering for that matter. Let me briefly give four of them. These are lessons we can learn from secondhand suffering.

1. Secondhand suffering can be as painful as suffering firsthand.

Though different from firsthand suffering, secondhand suffering can be equally acute and sharp. The trouble is that secondhand pain may be impossible to express.

While someone suffering physical pain can simply say, “I’m hurting,” the one who watches, unable to help or relieve the pain, is also hurting – only differently and perhaps, even more deeply.

2. Secondhand sufferers can reach points of despair more quickly than those who are suffering firsthand.

Mrs. Job is proof of this. She has already decided that God is not worthy of worship or submission. She has already decided that life is not worth living, and she is now advising Job to decide the same thing.

She has already reached the point of despair – and why not? Mrs. Job lost ten kids too! She has effectively lost her husband and her livelihood. Her husband once sat at the gates as a respected leader – the renowned man of the east. Their honor is gone – and as far as she is concerned, their hope is gone too.

In the Hebrew text, the verbs “curse” and “die” are imperatives. She is urgent in her counsel, which was no doubt, given through wrenching sobs and tears. I picture her having fallen to the ashes beside him, “Job, just give in and give up.”

However, Job does not agree – in chapter 2. He is not to that point of despair – in chapter 2. He will be in chapter 3, and he will curse the day he was born.

Secondhand suffering can prove to be more toxic to your faith than to that of those directly affected by the trials of life.

3. Secondhand sufferers have their own personal sorrows to endure and lessons to learn.

A sign on the wall of a junior high classroom contained these words, “Experience is the hardest teacher. It gives the test first and then the lesson.”^v

Have you ever felt like this? You are still struggling over the lessons, but the tests keep coming.

For the secondhand sufferer, there are often *two* sets of tests, not just one. There is the test of all that is happening to the person in your life who is suffering, and there is the test of what God wants you to learn as you suffer through it too.

One woman in our church put her thoughts on paper as she watched her husband look for another job – a process that included ups and downs which lasted for more than two years. When her husband had been laid off for quite a while and the pressure was mounting, along with the bills, she wrote some very insightful devotional thoughts. She wrote in one paragraph, entitled “Who will comfort me?”:

Both of you have been dramatically impacted by this layoff. Both of you have great needs. He has lost his job; you have lost your security. He thinks he has lost his identity because he lost employment; you think you’ve lost your identity because you feel like you’re losing him. He desperately wants a job and you desperately want him to have a job.^{vi}

This was, in part, the testimony of Mrs. Job. She has relied on Job for everything – for her economic existence, for her social status, for her moral standing in the community. But now, in a matter of moments, she too has lost everything. Her income is gone, now that the cattle and servants have been destroyed; her position as matriarch and wife of a prince has been lost.^{vii}

Through no fault of her own, Mrs. Job’s life has been turned upside down. She is reduced to living off handouts, enduring the pity and stares of former friends who used to envy her good fortune, while her husband – worst of all – sits at the town dump with all his honor destroyed; all his dignity gone, shivering with pain and fever; unable to eat; covered with sores. She now believes that sudden death would be better than lingering pain.

Mrs. Job has her own lessons to learn and questions to ask and tears to shed. This is her Gethsemane.

Spurgeon once said of this scene,

O dear friend, when thy grief presses thee to the dust, worship there. If that spot has come to be thy Gethsemane, then present there thy strong crying and tears unto thy God. Remember David's words, "Ye people, pour out your hearts" – but do not stop there, finish the quotation – "Ye people, pour out your hearts before Him." Turn the vessel upside down; it is a good thing to empty it, for this grief may ferment into something more sour; turn the vessel upside down, and let every drop run out; let it run out before the Lord.^{viii}

4. Secondhand sufferers may reach wrong conclusions and need help in balancing their biblical perspective and godly stand.

In other words, the secondhand sufferer may need the sufferer to help them grow up, more than the sufferer needs the secondhand sufferer to help them stand up.

Have you ever gone to visit someone who is suffering – either at the hospital or in their home – and when you left, you were convinced that you did not do them any good, but they had deposited strength into your own soul? You were wondering how they were going to get past it or through it, and they told you everything they were getting out of it. You did not do them any good, but they did a world of good for you.

This is exactly what happens to Mrs. Job. She has lost her balance. She finds her husband at the garbage site and says to him, "Job, it's time to bury your testimony of faith and renounce God and die."

Lessons about firsthand suffering

Then, Job, the sufferer, becomes Job, the teacher. I want to draw several lessons from Job's response to his wife.

1. Suffering is never an excuse to lash out at others.

Notice Job 2:10a.

But he said to her, "You speak as one of the foolish women speaks. . . ."

This may seem to be harsh at first, but it is actually kind restraint. Notice that Job does not call his wife a fool or a foolish woman, but says, "You are speaking as one of the foolish women speaks."

In other words, "I know you're not like one of them, even though you're talking like one of them. I know that's not really you."

Job does not lash out and call his wife a fool, which is the Hebrew word, "nabal". This word is used in the Old Testament for someone who is actually impious and undiscerning.

Job is effectively saying to her, "You are speaking words that are beneath you. You know God better than that. I know you're disillusioned because you have so much to grieve over, but this idea of cursing God is the talk of women who do not know God – like you do."^{ix}

This was actually a kind way to remind his wife of something she already knew.

2. Suffering is often the best podium from which deep truths can be taught.

Job continues to teach, in Job 2:10b.

. . . "Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?" . . .

The Hebrew verb "accept," or "qabal," describes an active, positive participation in that which God delivers, not just some sort of passive reception.^x

Not passive reception, but acceptance. The same embracing of the good things from God embraces the painful things from God.

Mrs. Job had resigned; Job had received. Hers was resignation and despair; his was reception and hope.

Another woman who suffered greatly wrote these words,

"Resignation and acceptance are two different things. Resignation is surrender to fate; acceptance is surrender to God. Resignation lies down quietly in an empty universe. Acceptance rises up to meet the God who fills the universe with purpose and destiny. Resignation says, "I can't," while acceptance says, "I can." Resignation says, "It's all over for me." Acceptance asks, "Now that I'm here, Lord, what's next?" Resignation says, "What a waste." Acceptance asks, "Lord, in what redemptive way can you use this mess."

So wrote Elizabeth Elliott, the wife of a missionary who was killed by members of an Amazonian tribe of Indians; a woman who went back into their village, along with Marge Saint and their children, translated the Bible and saw nearly the whole tribe come to faith in Jesus Christ.^{xi}

Now, forty years later, one of those children, Steve Saint, stood in the pulpit of our church a few

months ago, and declared the faithful work of God and the wonder of His sovereign plan.

3. Suffering is the proving ground of our satisfaction with the will of God.

Habakkuk, the Old Testament prophet, put it this way when he wrote,

Though the fig tree should not blossom and there be no fruit on the vines, though the yield of the olive should fail and the fields produce no food, though the flock should be cut off from the fold and there be no cattle in the stalls, yet I will exult in the Lord, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation. (Habakkuk 3:17)

By the way, I am very encouraged that we have no record of a rebuttal from Mrs. Job. There were no heated words in return to his kind rebuke and gentle lesson of God's right to give both joy and pain. This indicates to me that she agreed, and perhaps she came under great conviction. We do not know, but perhaps there was a revival in her own spirit that day at the city dump, on the ash heap next to her suffering husband.

Conclusion

The first section of the book of Job could rightly be entitled, "When Lightning Strikes". It certainly struck the life and property of Job – his family, his fortune, his dreams, his comfort – his plans went up in smoke.

The last scene of this first section is Job and his wife, perhaps huddled on the ground. She is unable to rest her head on his shoulder, but perhaps she sits next to him. How much he would love to reach his arms around her and comfort her, but all he can do is quietly remind her to trust in the faithfulness of God.

Let me wrap up this first section with a verse from I Peter, in which the apostle Peter wrote,

Therefore, those also who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right. (I Peter 4:19)

Note Peter is talking about,

. . . those who suffer according to the will of God . . .

Mr. and Mrs. Job were not the first and they are not the last. Maybe you also are suffering according to the will of God. Perhaps you are experiencing secondhand suffering – or perhaps you are suffering firsthand.

What does Peter say to do?

. . . entrust [your] souls to a faithful Creator . . .

What great advice this is. The Greek word for "entrust," or "paratithemi," is a banking term meaning, "to deposit". It carried the idea of depositing treasure into safe and trustworthy hands.

When you deposit money into your bank, there is a limit as to how much the FDIC will insure – it is around 100,000 dollars. I have never tested the limit.

However, our Creator God has no limits on what He can insure. Whatever you deposit into His care is safe. This is blessed assurance.

God will never say to the sufferer, "Sorry, that's more than I can handle . . . that's the limit . . . I can't guarantee any more."^{xii}

No. Peter says, "When you suffer, you can rest assured that your soul and every detail of your life is in the powerful hands of your Creator and you can rest in His compassion and care in the midst of your ash heap – even when the toxic fumes of secondhand suffering fill your heart and mind with fear and doubt."

God is faithful and strong.

By the way, the same Greek word "entrust" that Peter used, was also used years earlier by our Lord when He hung upon that cross and uttered those final words,

. . . "Father, into Your hands I commit – I entrust – My spirit." . . . (Luke 23:46)

If at the hour of His greatest suffering, Jesus could entrust His life into the hands and will of His Father, then so can we. And when we do, we become a little more like Mr. and Mrs. Job, and even a little more like our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 2/18/2007 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ "Secondhand Smoke Fact Sheet," Aug. 2006, <http://www.lungusa.org>.

ii Ibid.

iii Albert Barnes, Notes on the Old Testament: Job, Volume 1 (Baker, 1949), p. 118.

iv David J. A. Clines, Word Biblical Commentary: Job 1-20 (Word, 1989), p. 53.

v John MacArthur, The Power of Suffering (Victor Books, 1995), p. 135.

vi Diane Johnson, Blue Moods/Blue Skies.

vii Clines, p. 51.

viii Charles Spurgeon, The Suffering of Man & The Sovereignty of God (Fox River Press, 2001), p. 18.

ix Clines, p. 54.

x John E. Hartley, Job (Eerdmans, 1988), p. 84.

xi Jill Briscoe, "In My Father's Arms," <http://www.preachingtoday.com>.

xii Charles Swindoll, Hope Again (Word, 1996), p. 210.