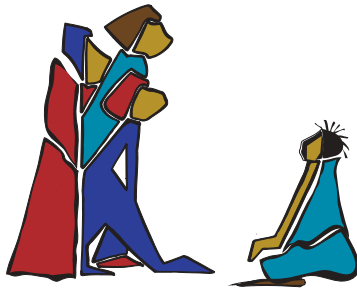


UZ

JOB'S JOURNEY



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Welcome to Uz

Everything is beautiful. The sun is shining, birds are singing, and your life is good. All cylinders are firing and you are cruising along life's highway, thinking everything is just wonderful. Then suddenly a tire blows and in a moment of time things begins to take an awful turn. You lose control. No one likes to lose control. In an instant, life with a jerk spins and rolls over in what eye witnesses call an awful accident. When things stop spinning, or you wake up in the hospital, or stand by a graveside, or look for that something or someone who now is gone, you realize that you have lost. In the spiritual life, having lost is more painful than being lost. In your BC years you did not realize you were lost.

Sooner or later we will all experience a great loss. The loss of a loved one that somehow became half yourself. The loss of health, or wealth, or job, or freedom, is something catastrophic. What is lost may be different for different people, but the more the thing or person was loved, the more and greater the pain. Catastrophic loss is our own personal 9/11. Catastrophic loss is loss as large as our own World Trade Center. How it came down, how it collapsed, how it imploded is something that will be repeated in the "slow motion" of our own memory and imagination. The marriage that failed (even when promises and vows of fidelity were pledged in front of many witnesses) has staggered one of its partners. Perhaps one feels the pain of betrayal, while the other has gone merrily off on a Caribbean curise and a storybook romance. With a mix of shock and embarrassment one partner picks through the rubble of a once happy life trying to decide if anything is worth salvaging from the ruins. There is the photograph you

took at Niagara Falls where you were both smiling, not realizing how close you were to the edge.

Perhaps health was stolen while you slept, and suddenly a doctor told you that Cancer had come to live as an unwelcome guest and rearrange the furniture of your once beautiful life. Perhaps the man who was once your mentor told you that you had “thirty minutes” to clean out your desk and leave the premises, and you tried to handle the burning words “you’re fired.” Perhaps you watched your dream destroyed by terrorists as they hurled their anger into the plate glass of your hard work and achievement. However it comes, whether as a “Thief in the Night,” or like a growing advance of a Roman Legion laying siege on your golden city, the result is always the same. It has taken from us something very valuable and precious.

After the initial shock of a catastrophic loss, after faith has looked around for its North Star or ancient landmarks of assurance, after the smoke has drifted away and the dust has settled, there comes a disconcerting silence. All the condolences have been given, flowers of sympathy laid on the grave, all the reassuring handshakes have released their clasp and everyone has gone home, then there is an awful silence.

The only voice we hear at this moment is our own. It often is one of recrimination and rebuke. How did you allow this to happen? How could you have been so dense, dumb, or distracted? Why did you not watch the road, the wall, or stock market more carefully? “You have lost, so you *must* be a loser.” “**LOSER!**”

Somewhere in the twisted metal is faith. You see it there, not moving, and you try to find some sign of life. Most of the time, faith will be the first to call out and tell you that it is okay. Perhaps when that happens, the loss has not quite reached the level of Catastrophic. I am talking about a 9/11 experience. I am talking about when even faith goes silent. This is not to say that faith is really dead or that God is no longer there, but there comes a time, an awful time, of being alone with the reality of a personal loss that no human on earth can share. It is your loss. It is personal. Perhaps along the way, eventually providence will conscript some Cyrene to help carry your cross, but for now you alone feel the full weight and must carry it alone along your own "Way of Sorrow." Like the Master, you too, following in His footsteps find yourself "staggering" under the weight of an unwanted load. Our Via Dolorosa does not end at the cross, as much as begin with a cross, a cross shaped by our loss.

Our Lord was absent for three long days before the resurrection. What painful and lonely days they were, for if the truth be told, none of the disciples had any hope of such a miracle, and a life without hope is no life at all.

Hope is the first to be born and hope is always the last to die. Sometimes hope, does not show how violent the crash was and how deep the injuries until much later. But, just as with blunt and internal trauma, hope suddenly becomes sick. Sometimes, hope may become unconscious and even end up in the intensive care unit. This might happen after an initial rush of resumes were sent out and hope waited in vain for a reply that never came. Hope filled out a hundred job applications. Then when it inquired as to why it received no "love letters" in reply to its own proposals, it was told "too old," "too

qualified,” “too un-qualified,” “not what we are looking for,” or a hundred other excuses and hope realizes that it was not pretty enough to be asked to go to the senior prom.

Perhaps the boys, businesses, opportunities, or options are just lining up to ask you for a date, if so- you have not yet come to Catastrophic loss. But if you know what it is to look at a phone that refuses to ring, or down the street for a mailman that will not come with good news, then you have been to the place the Prophet Job had found so long ago. Then you have come to the land of Uz.

Job

The Oldest Book is the Book of Job. It is the story of one man's life, his loss, and what we may learn from sorrow. It takes up the topic of tragedy and unfolds the mystery behind this one man's misery. It is the story of faith purged by fire. The Book of Job is a glimpse into a fiery furnace. It is a rare look at a single soul's faith being refined. Only God knows the melting point of faith. As the words of God are "pure words, refined in a furnace of earth, purified seven times"(Ps. 12:6), so too true faith will know the fire is only to prove it precious. While Job's experience is profound in its depth and disclosure, it is unique only in its degree. Few fires have ever burned so hot. But faith is always found faithful. Faith is not finished until there is fire. The three Hebrew children in the furnace of Babylon were made fine for the flames. Sooner or later every faith will find the heat. Peter said, "think it not strange" (1Pet. 4:12-19). What gold loses in the ordeal cannot be compared to what it gains (Prov. 25:4; 2Tim. 2:21). It is only when things cool down that we are able to say with the Psalmist "it was good that I was afflicted" (Ps. 119:71).

Job was painfully aware that he was experiencing a test, he was not aware he was involved in a contest. Satan is the "Accuser" of the brethren. The evil one charged that Job loved the gifts more than the giver. He insisted that, were it not for the prosperity, protection and privilege, Job would actually "curse" God to his face. Soon all the props that appeared to hold him up would be removed and the question would soon be answered: Will faith stand?

This scenario has played itself out again and again through the ages. When our faith does not understand,

will it still stand? Will it survive when every prop has been removed and it is stripped of every outward reason to rejoice?

Job saw every outward support suddenly taken away. His response was classic. “Naked came I out of my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away, blessed be the name of the LORD”(Job 1:21).

As a cork which refuses to sink continues to pull to the surface, so faith tangled in the heavy nets of circumstances can remain beneath the waves only so long. It must rise, for that is the law within its nature. Faith is a gift from God that always rises.

Things

Job had many things, but Jesus said life does not consist in the abundance of things. As if to prove it, God took all of Job's things away, or to more correctly tell it, He allowed Satan to strip a godly man of everything. The evil one sent the Sabeans, who came with swords to burn, to steal, to plunder and to destroy in one afternoon what it had taken a lifetime to accumulate. What the Sabeans missed the Chaldeans carried away. Then, as if depleted stores and fallen stocks, and bankruptcy were not enough, God allowed a storm to rise up (seemingly out of nowhere) to take the lives of his real treasure, that of sons and daughters.

His own spirit gravely wounded, he bowed, and although reduced to sackcloth and ashes, Job worshiped God. His faith was still alive, but Satan was not finished yet. What could not bring down a Saint from without may bring him down if from within. Again with the permission of heaven, Job would be tested to the bone in boils and blisters from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot. Satan took away his health.

It seemed that Job's life had been reduced to little more than the ashes he sat upon and his only relief came from scraping his oozing sores with the fragments of broken jars. And then what the pain of poverty had not done, and the agony of pestilence could not finish, the piercing words of disdain from his life's partner seemed to do. He was crushed. Even the aid of human sympathy that might have held him up was taken away. Still, in all this, Job trusted God.

The final test came when "so-called" friends attempted with their doctrines to destroy the last vestige of faith

and leave it in the pile of other broken things that littered the landscape of this once happy life. Job was about to be plunged through depression into darkness. After waiting seven suffering days in silence he finally opened his mouth with a wish that he had never been born.

Although his soul seemed mortally wounded and his spiritual pulse was faint, he and his faith were still alive. Grace drew a line over which Satan was not permitted to go. There was a boundary that evil was not allowed to breach. Job was loved by a good God who said “a bruised reed he would not break, and a smoking flax he would not quench.” The sun would shine again.

Depression

“Curse God and Die.” Job 2:9

Never was there worse advice given to a human being. Job’s life was reduced to a pile of ashes upon which he sat and with which he covered his head. It would be hard to imagine a more pitiful sight he. Where once he was the epitome of success and prosperity and perhaps the envy of all who ever heard of his good fortune, he now became an illustration of ruin. Stripped of the last vestiges of dignity, the name “Job” became an epithet most pitiful. His wife held out no hope and offered no help with her contemptuous counsel.

Why not just “end it all?” Why not just commit suicide? Why not, like Judas, just go out and hang yourself? Would it not end the misery, remorse, humiliation and pain? The sound of Job’s wife has long fallen silent, she was one of many howling voices in Job’s wilderness, but she was just a voice. Jesus said my sheep hear my voice and follow me. There is a difference between the Word and the voice. Even the best of us can be fooled if we are not careful. Isaac said “It feels like Esau, but it sounds like Jacob” (paraphrase). Things are not always what they seem so we must ask God for discernment. Job might well have said, “The voice sounds like my wife’s voice, but the words sound like Satan’s.”

Satan, you remember, was the one who was attacking Job all along. This had been permitted by God to test the reality of Job’s faith. The Devil has offered suicide as a solution to more than most would like to admit. For the majority, the evil suggestion is absurd and rejected out of hand, but for many caught in the throes of

desperation, shame, and despair, it offers the promise of some relief.

The Philippian jailor, in one last desperate act was about to throw himself upon his own sword when he thought his prisoners had run away. Paul called out from the darkness, “do thyself no harm.” That voice of hope was also a voice of reason. Satan would have to look elsewhere for someone to follow the gospel of his gallows. Satan is a liar. He lied about the pleasures of sin, and he lies about relief from its pains.

Like an astronaut suspended in space and connected to his space craft by a long thin tether, a man on the edge of desperation is not only at the end of his rope, he has come to the end of his hope. Hope is the first grace given, and it is the last to die. All who have ever committed suicide have one thing in common. They finally lost hope. Cutting the tether holding a space explorer to his system of life support makes as much sense as suicide. Faith begins with a single thin strand. But even before there is faith, there is hope. Under no circumstances, cut that cord. As a babe learns “hope” on its mother’s breast (Ps.22:9), so faith is nourished in hope. As long as there is life there is hope. As long as there was life, there was hope for Hitler, and for Haman, and for Attila the Hun. Once they died hope died with them. To extinguish this last flickering flame is to consign a soul to a never ending night. “*Curse God and die,*” is the most despicable advice. It cuts the cord of hope. Job’s response about trusting God no matter what was powerful medicine indeed. “*though he slay me, yet will I trust him.*” Job 13:15. In other words, “Trust God and live.”

Sparks

The world is troubled. Job's friend points this out saying "Man is born unto trouble as the sparks fly upward" (Job 5:7). That there is going to be trouble is a given fact. The waters as well as the wind will be troubled. Trouble will come, yet it was Jesus who said "Let not your heart be troubled." Trouble is often found where two opposing forces collide. It was at Cape Horn, the southernmost end of the continent, where the Atlantic meets the Pacific that the most violent churning waters and treacherous straits test the mettle of a man. Among the ancient mariners, one was not considered a true sailor until he had sailed around the Horn.

Where the Atlantic meets the Pacific is a dangerous place. But then again, so too might be any beach if we are not careful. Any who have witnessed white-capped breakers crash upon the beach driven by a storm coming ashore knows the fury of nature in conflicting weather fronts. Then there are the spiritual weather fronts. Few scenes are more turbulent or more dangerous than the place where Heaven and Hell collide. Enormous thunderheads rise in plumes until they clash with climates that are opposite, and then all fury breaks forth in the forming lightning, thunder, and swirling winds. Hail rains down from the heavens.

Men separated by mere inches can be experiencing different forces of spiritual experience. For one it may be spring and for another the dead of winter. One man may be in harvest and another going through a drought.

We have to tell our story. First we want to tell God our cause (as if He does not know already) Job. 5:8. When it seems that even He will not listen, we will tell anyone

who will (9:14). Our friends have little patience to listen, so we wish that we could write what we feel down in a book (Job 19:19,23).

When we have gone through some horrific tragedy and have fallen into such sorrow that our own story astonishes us, by its depth and magnitude, we are likely to feel that “Nobody knows da [sic] trouble I Seen” as the old Negro spiritual goes. God knows. Job did not realize that, not only would his experience be written down in a book, but that it would be read by millions who would find comfort in it when they would find themselves sitting where Job was forced to sit. In Job’s hellish experience many have found hope.

The shoals off the coast of North Carolina are littered with the wreckage of hundreds of ships that never made their ports of call. Although each had made their plans and charted their course carefully, many discovered that the ocean makes no promises. Nowhere does the Bible teach that we can expect an easy time of it, or smooth sailing. The same force that fills the sail endangers the souls on board. The same water that carries our ambitions on its surface one day, may swamp our plans the next. Even the Apostle Paul discovered a saint’s journey can be very treacherous. He came ashore on Malta clinging to the flotsam and jetsam of a foundered vessel. But while the vessel was lost, not so his life. Although soaking wet and chilled to the bone, Paul rode ashore on the breaking waves of providence.

The storms of life cause us to rid our lives of the non-essentials. As the sailors jettisoned the tackle (Acts 27:18-19;38) and eventually their cargo, there comes a time when we are forced to choose between the nice and the necessary.

Job was forced to take stock. There was almost nothing left. Everything was gone but hope. Hope is always the last thing to die. Job still had hope. A tree cut to the ground may appear to have finished its course, yet at the scent of water there is still hope that it will be revived (Job 14:7-9). Job teaches us that loss is not the end of life.

Even if some cruel axe fall the tree and what we appeared to be hoping for is hauled off to the mill and made into planks, God has the final word. A fallen tree may sprout again. Life is not over until God says it is over.

Job's Friends

Job is a fascinating study of the righteous and the religious. In Job we are witness to the earliest lectures about God. Job had three friends who seemed to come to rub salt in his wounds. They remind me of most religious people today. Each is a presumed expert about God. As we listen to their explanations about God, most of what they say is true as far as it goes. Each has a religious explanation to explain what had happened to Job. There is much talk about un-confessed sin and the righteousness of God. There is talk about “cause and effect,” and what some might call the law of Karma. Job protests his innocence and reminds everyone of all his good deeds, generosity, and piety. Each time, he is knocked back down by his religious friends, who know nothing about the furnace. “How long will you vex my soul and break me in pieces with words? (19:1). While it is true that the Word of God is like a hammer, many a poor creature has been battered and bashed by sermons and self-righteous stone masons who swing it carelessly. What the Sabeans left in broken pieces, Job's friends grind to powder. Jesus said, “he that is without sin cast the first stone...” Today, there is no shortage of people who are more than glad to let the rocks fly.

Job was the best. He was the example God chose to set as an example of His grace. But even Job had dross that must be boiled out. Job protested and wanted to know where God might be found so he could storm into the courts of justice and plead his case (23:3).

Through all these arguments, defenses, and theological dissertations about the Almighty, God Himself was silent.

Imagine all the nonsense God must listen to as sinful creatures wax eloquent and try to explain His ways. How

proud and pompous we must appear. From doctors of Theology rising everywhere supposing that they have by Greek and Hebrew defined, conjugated, and discovered God's secrets and understand His ways. No one did a better job of defending himself than Job. From his own words we may learn much about the greatness of the Almighty. How patient God must be! He puts up with all our sermons and all our nonsense.

Finally God himself speaks to Job. Finally God reveals what is hidden. God directs Job's attention to the stars and the power of God's creation. He speaks of His wisdom in great and little things. He puts Job to shame with thunder, lightning and whirlwind. God then describes for Job some awful and terrifying beast. I have heard these pompous theological experts argue about this behemoth and this leviathan. Some say it is an elephant some a crocodile, or "whatever." These religious experts are nowhere near where Job has finally come. Job finally realizes that all he was saying was vain. He said "Behold, I am vile; what shall I answer thee? I will lay mine hand upon my mouth" (40:4). That is impossible for most of us preachers to do. We have so much to say.

There are times when we would do well to just "shut up" and listen. This beast God describes to Job (Ch.41) is something that is Job's "worst nightmare." As a matter of fact, one would be "cast down at the sight of him." What are you afraid of the most? What, if you should come face to face with it would make you well, you know what I mean? Terrified. God says, "if you would not want to stir that up, who could stand before me?" Those who get a glimpse of God (and live to tell about it) have often fainted, fallen down, and collapsed as dead men. These religious experts who describe God, often don't know what they are talking about.

God is good we say. We have no idea just how good. We say God is great. We have no idea of how great. Listen to Job when he finally meets the God he thought he knew. “I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.” (42:5-6). Job’s friends were right (to a point), Job was more right (as much as he could see). But even Job was horrified by how much dross of “self-righteousness” was still in his heart. God brought his faith forth as gold.

Happy Endings

Job was caught in the middle of a cosmic contest. God knew that Job loved and feared God, but all the world needed to know that there are such a servant. Job stands as an eternal witness to hope. He holds out hope to every soul that has ever experienced loss. Job reminds us that every life can have a happy ending, no matter how hard the journey and no matter how deep the pain. Job is a witness to a God who is good and knows our needs and who is working “all things together for good to all those who love Him.” Job is a testimonial to faith that has sworn its allegiance to God, no matter what. Job was called “my servant.” We, by faith, are servant-sons. We have found that in the end, at the end of the day, God will make all things new. Faith will not only crawl out of the rubble of catastrophic loss, faith will laugh and sing again. In the end Job enjoyed a renewed happiness. The story of every life of faith has a beginning, a middle, and an ending. Faith begins when it bows at the feet of the Son of God and believes in Him. The middle is the refining process of sanctification where God allows circumstances to burn the dross away. Then there will be the end. May ours like his, be as the Bible says, His end was better than his beginning.

Suddenly the captivity is turned. Suddenly old friends (strangely absent for forty-two chapters) reappear. Relatives and “acquaintances” seem to materialize. The philosophers are rebuked by God Himself. Gifts are bestowed, everyone comes with tokens of friendship now that the storm is past. Children are born, and Job is rich again. And the world is richer for the life and lessons of Job. God poured out His blessings on Job’s head.

There never was an Oz, but there was an Uz. Perhaps you have been there and back. Perhaps you might suddenly find yourself sitting where Job sat. Perhaps you have suffered loss already. Perhaps you will know loss tomorrow. There are some things that cannot be taken away. Faith, hope, and love, if real are resilient. If you find something precious is gone or taken do not lose hope. God is still there. Perhaps He is simply trying to make you more with less. Perhaps He is trying to get you ready for the final and last chapter of a story that will bring Him both pleasure and glory. Perhaps God wants to take away every prop and crutch, not so you have nothing to lean on, but in order that you might lean on Him.