

Fear and Trembling

The Book of Job forces us to confront our deepest questions about God.

BY DONALD E. BURKE

I haven't taught the Book of Job for many years. It's not always an experience I embrace, because what the book demands of me is not so much that I "teach," but that I journey with Job—that I share his tragedy, his abandonment, his outrage and his confrontation with God. Students who fully enter the text also find that they are laid bare, that the study of Job is not so much a spectator sport as it is an experience that engulfs us. In some mysterious way, Job has the power to put into words what we have always been afraid to think or say. Reading Job isn't for the faint-hearted. Read at your own risk! Let me explain why.

The Contest

The Book of Job opens in the heavens, in the royal court of God. Surrounded by the heavenly host, God calls the assembly to order. All seems to go according to protocol until God spots the *satan*, an enigmatic figure whose role is to search throughout the earth to test God's creatures. At the time Job was written, the *satan* was not yet understood as Satan, the incarnation of evil or the Evil One. In Job, *satan* is more of a title, a role, than it is a personal name. The *satan* was God's private investigator, the crown prosecutor who would probe beneath the surface to expose the darkest secrets and foibles of God's creatures. So, we have to set aside our thinking about Satan to let the satanic figure in Job play his role.

Job's troubles start when God points him out to the *satan* and claims that he is a person of unsurpassed moral quality, someone who fears God and shuns evil. There is no one else as virtuous, no one who can hold a candle to Job. But the *satan* is not prepared to accept this assertion. "Does Job fear God for nothing? Isn't Job God-fearing and righteous simply because that's what gives him all

the good things in life? Take it all away and then we'll see his true colours." The *satan* wants to test Job. Shockingly, God accepts the challenge and grants the *satan* the authority to strip Job of his wealth and his family. A series of tragedies befalls Job in rapid succession. Just as Job's uprightness seems almost unbelievable, so, too, is the series of disasters that take from him his children, his flocks and herds, and all of his wealth. Job's response seems a little too pious as well—he seems almost untouched by his losses. "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord" (see Job 1:21). It appears that God has won the wager with the *satan*—Job is indeed a God-fearing, righteous man, the likes of which the world has never seen.

God's justice is far greater, far richer and perhaps even far darker than we can see.

Suffering and Silence

In a second round of trials, the *satan* ups the ante, this time afflicting Job within an inch of his life with oozing sores from head to toe. Observing her husband's excruciating suffering, Job's wife encourages him to curse God and die to end his torment. But Job rejects her advice, scolding his wife sharply. Deprived of his children, stripped of all his possessions and suffering unbearably, now he is alienated even from his wife.

Friends gather around Job. They remain silent, as does Job in his suffering. Until Chapter 3, that is. After seven days

of silent vigil with his friends, Job finally speaks and a torrent of words spills out. What he says is an utter shock—the pious, tempered Job is gone. Exposed before us is a Job we have not seen before. He curses the day of his birth and the night of his conception. The darkness envelops him. He demands to know why this is happening to him. What wrong has he done to deserve this? Job comes to the brink of cursing God, as his wife had encouraged.

Throughout the succeeding chapters, Job says outrageous—even blasphemous—things about God. This is not the patient Job we are so often taught about. This is Job's darkest soul exposed. Outraged by the injustice of his losses, paralyzed by his unbearable pain, Job rants—even rages—against God, demanding a hearing. "Put me on trial! Give me my day in court and then we'll see who is righteous!" he screams at God. Job accuses God of all manner of ill will and wrongdoing against him. Yet God is silent.

It is the silence that is killing Job. It is the silence of God in his darkest hour that shocks Job the most and thrusts a knife into his heart. Yet, even in the midst of his rants and in the face of God's silence, Job clings to God. He will not let God go; he hounds God, relentlessly pursuing justice, seeking a hearing with God. One word would suffice. But all he hears is a divine silence.

On the other hand, Job's friends can't keep their mouths shut. They rush to God's defence, forgetting that it is not God who needs a friend, a defender, an advocate, but rather Job. They accuse Job of being a secret sinner, someone whose piety is external, a show for others to see, but whose heart is darkened by every vice imaginable. The only explanation they have for Job's situation is that he must have committed some grievous sin.



After all, according to their theology, the righteous prosper and the wicked suffer. For them, Job's suffering is sufficient proof of his wickedness.

Through several cycles of debate, Job and his friends spar with one another: Job accusing God (and them) of abandoning him and the friends accusing Job of having done something so heinous as to deserve his suffering. How easy it is for those who are piously comfortable to judge the rage of those who are suffering!

Job is being pushed toward a God who is not bound by creeds and confessions, but who is nevertheless real. But Job's friends are tied to their theology, their assessment of how God works in the world. The righteous will be rewarded and only the wicked suffer. None of them know about the contest between God and the Satan that started this whole show.

An Encounter With the Living God

The astonishing thing about the Book of Job is that by the end, when God finally speaks, it is Job and not his friends who God vindicates and judges to have spoken truthfully. The friends are condemned by God, their defence of God apparently unneeded or unwarranted in the face of their friend's suffering. By standing up for God, they have failed Job and now stand condemned.

Job himself does not come out of his encounter with God unscathed. He is humbled. He learns that while his treatment seems unjust from his perspective, there is a much larger work underway

in the world and that God is very much involved in it. God's justice is far greater, far richer and perhaps even far darker than we can see.

Reading the Book of Job forces us to examine the depth of our love for God. Do we indeed love God simply for who he is? Is our love without strings, without the expectation that God will reward us for our faithfulness? Or do we love God because we expect a good return on our investment? Is ours a *quid pro quo* love? Reading Job forces these questions upon us.

What about the friends? Job forces us to think deeply about friendship and solidarity with those who are suffering. In the face of unimaginable pain, is it really necessary to defend God against accusations of injustice? Or should we take the side of our suffering friend or family member—even for a few moments, weeks or months? Even silence would be greater wisdom in such circumstances than our rush to find words.

What about justice? We unthinkingly affirm God's justice, implying that people get what they deserve. But people often *do not get what they deserve*. Where is this God of justice in those circumstances? It simply is not fair, we say. Sometimes in response to the injustice of human suffering, we claim that we want to live in a world where we receive only what is fair. But what if we received only what we deserve? That would rule out grace. It would rule out gifts we do not deserve. The gratuitous acts of kind-

ness that give depth and texture to our lives would be missing. Love itself would likely be absent, since we rarely, if ever, deserve the love others bestow upon us. Do we really want to live in a world in which fairness trumps grace?

Not for the Faint of Heart

As I think about it, it's little wonder that I haven't taught the Book of Job for many years. It demands so much of me. It calls me to question so many things, to think deeply about the unthinkable suffering of others, to face my own fears and disappointments. It raises questions about my theology, about how I think God is at work in the world. It forces me to step out beyond my theology to an encounter with the living God. Job prompts me to risk asking hard questions and forces me to examine my own motivations for loving God. I am left asking, "Do I really love God for who he is? Or is my love for God conditional upon God giving me all the good things I want, and saving me from all the hard things I wish to escape?" In other words, through the Book of Job God interrogates me and speaks to me bluntly. And, like Job, while I might long for the silence to end, I am not sure that I am ready to hear God's voice and to stand before God naked and exposed.

Reading the Book of Job—really *reading* the Book of Job—is not for the faint of heart. It requires a trusted guide, a safe place and a determination to hold on to God no matter what. As I think about it, that's also what life is about. And just as I often try to escape from life to a safe place, I also try to avoid the questions posed by Job. But Job is there, waiting for that moment when I am pressed to read the book again, ready to push me further and deeper—and, I hope, closer to God. ☺

Dr. Donald E. Burke is a professor of biblical studies at Booth University College in Winnipeg.