

Faith in the Midst of the Pit

Scripture: Job 19

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People of God: The conversation continues between Job and his friends. I'm tempted to call them, Job's "so-called friends." Because they don't seem like real friends to me. After all, here we have Job, in complete misery, his business destroyed, his family killed, and his health taken away. Along come his friends and they offer Job cold comfort. They put all the blame on Job. Job deserved his suffering. He just needed to repent and all things will be well. With friends like that, who needs enemies?

When we get to chapter 19, Job has ended up at the bottom of the pit. The accusations and finger pointing of his friends have taken their toll on Job. It has added to his intense suffering and makes him struggle even more with his condition. He cries out:

How long will you torment me and crush me with words? Ten times now you have reproached me; shamelessly you attack me. The words of his friends have caused a great deal damage for Job.

I wonder whether we are fully aware of the power of our words? We can build each other in the faith through words of encouragement and support, but we can also tear each other down through a quick word of criticism. With modern technology, it's easy to send a quick email of complaint, but too often the tone of such email lack compassion and love. I know, for myself, that if I allow my cynical, sarcastic nature to emerge, it can cause a lot of damage. Our words can easily crush another person's spirit; as a result, we need to be careful about how we use our words.

Job was ending up at the bottom of the pit because of the torment of the words of his friends. He is also feeling that God is at war with him. Job's

being trying to get an answer from God, but God has remained silent. He feels as if God is laying siege to him. To paraphrase verse 12: It's as if a mighty army advances, building a road for the giant catapults and battering rams, ready to break down the walls. But the object of the siege isn't a walled fortress, but one little tent.

It's one thing to have your friends turn against you; it's another thing to feel that God has as well. What happens when you can no longer sing, "What a friend we have in Jesus?" In it, we sing, "Do your friends despise, forsake you? Take it to the Lord in prayer! In his arms he'll take and shield you; you will find a solace there." Job could sing the first part of that line, but not the final part. He isn't finding God to be a shield or solace, but an attacking army. If you can't find in God a friend, what do you do?

And so, Job is at the bottom of the pit. He goes on, in verses 13 to 20, to describe his complete rejection by family and friends. One commentator describes it this way: "From his community, he needs solace; from his household, he needs respect; and from his [wife], he needs intimacy. Instead, he is avoided by his brothers, ignored by his servants, and rejected by his wife." Even the street kids make fun of Job. And in the ancient world, where respect for elders was an important value, being ridiculed by the street kids reflects how deep into the pit, Job had fallen.

What do you do when you're at the bottom of the pit? There are few options left. You can't pull yourself out of the pit. So what options are remaining? Shall I be so bold as to name them? It's either death or God.

Death is one option. Sometimes when suffering is so overwhelming, death is welcomed. (And for the Christian, death can be a release into eternal life. I have heard said many times: Death for the person was a blessing, because she was suffering so much. But death can only be a blessing, if you have hope that you will have eternal life after death. A hope we can have only in Jesus Christ. But that's really getting into the second option).

The first option is merely death itself. Either wanting it to come very soon, or taking matters into your own hand. Thinking death will be the end of the matter.

Job is at that point. He is at the verge of death. He cries out: "I am nothing but skins and bones; I have escaped with the only the skin of my teeth." (vs 20). Job is beginning to realize he may not last much longer. Death is upon him. But he still wants to be vindicated. And so, he expresses his final wish before he dies:

Oh, that my words were recorded, that they were written on a scroll,
that they were inscribed with an iron tool on lead, or engraved on rock
forever!

Job wanted his complaints and defense recorded so that even after his death they would endure until he is finally vindicated. His wish was granted, but his vindication comes in a way that he would never have imagined. But that's getting ahead of the story.

At this point, Job is thinking about death, as a final release; the end of the matter. But as he does so, he ends up with a confession of faith that defies the fact that he is at the bottom of the pit. All of a sudden, we have an expression of faith in God that seems to come completely out of nowhere. And that's the second option. At the bottom of the pit, the only person you can really turn to is God.

And so, Job, who just moments earlier felt God pressing upon him like a besieging army, makes this bold, daring, and totally unexpected personal testimony of faith:

I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me. (25-27)

Scholars are quick to warn against over spiritualizing this passage. My NIV study Bible, has this word of caution, "This staunch confession of faith has been appropriated by generations of Christians, especially through the medium of Handel's Messiah. But these celebrate redemption from guilt and judgment; Job had something else in mind." While of course, we need to hear these words of Job in their original context, we still find in them a gospel jewel.

"I know." This is a personal testimony that is confident and unshaken. "I know." Despite his suffering, the loss of his business, the death of his children, and the erosion of his health, this is what Job knows. Despite the words of torment from his friends, the sense of being pressed upon by God, and the ridicule of even the street kids, this is what Job knows. Personally. Confidently. Assuredly.

"I know that my Redeemer lives." Now don't quickly jump ahead to Jesus Christ and Easter morning. That's not what Job had in mind when he spoke these words. The Hebrew word for Redeemer, "ga'al", had a very specific role and function in the OT. A fuller title would be "kinsman redeemer."

This person had the task of standing up for someone who was enduring an injustice. He would defend the oppressed person, doing whatever he can to make things right for the person. If necessary he would buy a relative out of his slavery, buying back the family land, and even avenging the killing of a relative.

The most well known kinsman-redeemer in the OT is Boaz, in the story of Ruth. As a close relative of Naomi and Ruth, he had the duty to protect their interests. That's why Boaz makes sure Ruth is well treated when she gleaned in his fields. It's why he eventually marries Ruth, ensuring that the family line of Naomi continues.

Now Job confesses, "I know that my Redeemer lives." He knows that he has a defender, who will vindicate his name. He has an advocate who will clear his name before his friends and the world. He has someone who will redeem him from his state of misery and suffering.

And for Job that Redeemer is God himself. Yes, this same God, about whom Job had just complained was pressing upon him like an army. God himself will act as Job's defender, clearing his name; vindicating his reputation; redeeming him from the pit in which he is now in.

Now Job does not expect this act of God to take place while he is still alive. He does not count on the reversal of fortunes that we know happens at the end of the book. Instead, Job expects to die. But that after his death, he will see God. That in the life after death, he will be released from all his suffering. Then he will be freed from his suffering, as well as all these false accusations.

Now I don't think we realize how much of a break through this confession of Job is. This confidence that he will see God, after his death, is a rare OT insight. Throughout the OT, the focus is on living before God in this present life. There was very little emphasis on what happened after death. In the OT, there is not a full-blown doctrine of the resurrection of the body and the life-everlasting.

Except here. Here we have a rare and completely unexpected testimony of faith about life after death. Job expresses a belief in a personal resurrection of his body, with God: "I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another." In a way, Job is forced to get to that point, because as he experienced life in the world, life is not fair. But with God as his kinsman-redeemer, who will make all things right, when that does not happen in the here and now; then, it will have to wait until after death. And that is Job's expectation.

What an amazing confession of faith, spoken from the depths of the pit. What an incredible leap of faith!

Now for us, today, this confession of faith is clearer, given the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. What Job confesses in these verses is made possible through Jesus. Job had no understanding about how God would be his kinsman-redeemer. How would God vindicate his name? How could God

overcoming suffering? How will God make right what is wrong in the world? Well, God's ultimate and final answer is Jesus Christ.

Jesus is our kinsman-redeemer, coming to our rescue; restoring to us the blessings of life, we lost because of sin. As Boaz came to Ruth's aid and provided hope and new life to the family of Naomi, so Jesus comes to our aid and provides us new life. And in Jesus' death and resurrection, he overcame the forces of death and opened the way to eternal life, so that we too say: In Christ, "after my skin has been destroyed"—after I am dead and buried, "Yet, in my flesh I will see God." I will be resurrected with a new, glorified body, and I will be able to see and enjoy the presence of God in a way that I can never experience in this lifetime.

This is the bold and radical confession of faith that we can make. Today. In this world, where sin, evil and Satan run amok. In this world, where brokenness and suffering plague our lives. In this world, where we can find ourselves in the pit. In the depths of despair, we can cry out with this confident faith.

You see, even though this confession of faith is made possible because of Easter, it is spoken while we are going through the "Friday" experiences of life.

Again, when does Job make this confession of faith? Job expresses it, while at the bottom of the pit. After Job offers this testimony of faith, his suffering and torment continues. After all, we're only in the 19th chapter of this book. Job's friends have a lot more to say. Job will continue to cry out to God. But at the present time, God is silent. God does not answer in the next chapter, or the chapter after that. Not until chapter 38, does God speak.

At the bottom of the pit, in the midst of the silence of God, Job utters his confession:

I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me. (25-27)

Job's heart yearns for the fulfillment of these words.

Does your heart yearn for your final redemption? When you are experiencing life in the pit, do you cry out to God? Even when you feel it is God himself who is pressing upon you, are you still able to cling to him? Do you yearn for the day, when your suffering, the suffering of others will come to an end, when this creation will be completed renewed and restored to its original goodness? Do you yearn for the day when you will be able to see God face to face, an intimacy we cannot reach in this present life? Do you

yearn for the day when the Easter life will be fully and completely experienced? Amen.