

Who to Blame – Job 1:1, 2:1-10

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October 6, 2024

The images coming out of so many locales in the southeast following Hurricane Helene have been horrible. We've all seen them, and the destruction is really hard to fathom.

On social media, people who have been and are living through the aftermath are posting videos. In addition to the pictures and videos they are sharing, they also are putting themselves in front of their cameras so that we can see and hear them. And the looks on their faces reveal sorrow, dejection, frustration, and exhaustion.

There's been a little anger—namely at public officials and agencies they feel haven't acted as quickly as they could to help. But mostly, it's been sorrow and a deep sense of loss.

It would be understandable if they lashed out and blamed someone for the tragedy, including God. God has been the recipient of humanity's ire for many a tragedy or disaster.

When we lose elements of our lives that are deeply precious, we lament. We lament the loss of people, health, or a way of living that has been ripped away from us for no apparent reason.

As with every challenge that confronts us, we are faced with the choice of how we react to that challenge. And it's in that choice where we face a fine line between expressing how we feel and accepting what we cannot change.

As God's people, we have a right to express ourselves honestly in a way that shows our lament. The Psalms are filled with examples of how the writer lifted laments in the face of unspeakable suffering.

And there's a balance between cries that reflect our pain and suffering and affirmations that confirm our trust in the one who made us. Consider Psalm 22:

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest." Jesus, of course, used those same words as he hung on the cross. "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"

It's the anguished prayer of David as a godly sufferer victimized by the vicious and prolonged attacks of enemies whom he has not provoked and from whom the Lord has not yet delivered him. He has reason to cry out, "Why have you left me?"

And yet, later in the psalm, there's also David's trust and faith in the Lord: "Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not put to shame."

David was honest in his lament, but did not betray his allegiance.

In reading from Job 1 today, Job had every reason to kick God to the curb. The suffering he endured was brutal—and for no apparent reason. And yet, the writer says, "In all this, Job did not sin with his lips."

If Job had lamented, he would not have necessarily sinned. He just would not have crossed a line from lament to sin.

Who do we blame when things go wrong? God's an easy target.

Job did not sin with his lips, we read. And yet Job did not bear his affliction calmly, as a patient person would; instead, he

cried out, "I loathe my life; I will give free utterance to my complaint; I will speak in the bitterness of my soul" (10:1).

Far from showing "cheerful endurance," Job screams, "My spirit is broken, my days are extinct, the grave is ready for me" (17:1).

Then he moans, "God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me; If only I could vanish in darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face!" (23:16-17).

He's an honest and faithful man, yes. But he's not free from lament.

There are many life-changing lessons in the story of Job, messages about the nature of suffering and the importance of faithfulness to God. Here are two of them:

First, the nature of suffering. The book of Job makes it clear that not all human suffering is deserved — it is not necessarily a punishment for our sinful lives. Job is a righteous man, described by God as being "a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil" (1:8).

And yet, he loses his property to raiding Sabeans and Chaldeans, and his sons and daughters die in a natural disaster (1:13-19). As if this is not painful enough, he comes down with loathsome sores that cover him from head to foot (2:7). Job is an absolute mess, leaving onlookers to wonder, "What did he do to deserve this?"

The answer, of course, is, "Nothing." This intense suffering descends on Job through no fault of his own. Jesus himself knew this, and observed a number of years later that God "sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45). We should never be quick to conclude that anyone deserves the suffering they experience ... anyone, including ourselves.

Gerald Sittser was a history professor with a wonderful family. But one day, his wife, his 4-year-old daughter and his mother were all killed in a car accident caused by a drunk driver. Sittser's life had been going very well, but then, in one horrible moment, he lost three of the most precious people in his life.

His suffering was compounded eight months later, when the driver of the other car was acquitted of vehicular manslaughter. The defense attorney was able to cast enough suspicion on the testimony of several witnesses that he was able to get his client off the hook.

Sittser was enraged. But then he began to be bothered by his assumption that he had a right to complete fairness in life. "Granted, I did not deserve to lose three members of my family," he writes in his book *A Grace Disguised* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996). "But then again, I am not sure I deserved to have them in the first place." His wife was a woman who loved him through some very hard times. His mother lived well and served people to her life's end. His daughter sparkled with enthusiasm and helped to fill his home with noise and excitement. "Perhaps I did not deserve their deaths," he concludes; "but I did not deserve their presence in my life either."

We should never be quick to conclude that people deserve the suffering they experience ... but at the same time, we should never jump to the conclusion that people deserve their blessings, either. Job makes much the same point when he asks the question, "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" (2:10).

The second clear message of Job is that faithfulness to God is of critical importance, in bad times as well as in good times. Gerald Sittser did not turn his back on God after his family was

killed by a drunk driver, nor did Job abandon the Lord in his time of overwhelming loss. It is essential that we not give God the cold shoulder when we encounter a period of undeserved suffering.

Can we scream and yell at God? Sure. “I will not restrain my mouth,” shouts Job. “I will complain in the bitterness of my soul” (7:11). There is nothing wrong with offering up a passionate and honest lament, as long as we direct our complaining to God. Job grabs hold of the Lord, and he won’t let go until God responds to him. What saves Job is that he remains faithful to God, always demanding that God hear him and take him seriously and respond to his concerns.

In the end, as Carl Jung puts it, Job saw the shadow of God. He hears a word from God and is satisfied. “I know that you can do all things,” Job admits, “and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted” (42:2). He finds a sense of peace in his relationship with God, not in a list of neat and tidy responses to all his unanswered questions.

The same can be true for us. Like Job, our challenge is to walk that fine line—to lament our suffering but then accept both the bad and the good, and to remain in close contact with God through every twist and turn of life. Ultimately, we’ll find that it is an honest and intimate relationship with God that saves us and puts us in a position to discover true serenity and peace.

For the people of Asheville and all the other communities whose way of life has been shattered due to the hurricane, faithfulness to God doesn’t mean them letting this tragedy go unchecked, free of outrage and lament. And yet with this event should come a reminder to them that there are blessings and curses in life, none of which they deserve.

In this continuing, honest relationship with God, they'll be able to face any ordeal that comes their way, just as we should. And God, whose power and omnipotence we cannot fully understand, will always be here to love us. When everything else and everyone else is gone, that is what will always remain.