“Unraveled: Seeking Understanding When Everything Falls Apart”

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Job 28: 12-28

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Job is a difficult story to read. For those of you unfamiliar with the premise of this book, Job is a man who has everything and does everything right, but then due to a heavenly wager about the quality of his faithfulness,

loses everything, suffers greatly, is given terrible advice and care by some of his friends, faces God in a whirlwind, somehow remains faithful, and has all his losses restored, living happily ever after. It’s a hard story to read.

It’s not history. That helps. The character Job is not a historical figure like Abraham or Sarah, Peter or Paul. This is not a historical account of someone’s life. The book of Job is poetry. It’s part of the “writings” section of our Hebrew Scriptures, or Old Testament. These poetic books, often called “wisdom literature,” include the Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs. They move us from the sweeping narrative arc of the history of the people of Israel to a zoomed in look at human life: prayer, relationships, money, doubt, love, practical wisdom for daily life, and suffering.

John Goldingay, Old Testament scholar at Fuller Seminary, writes that

“Job…does not focus on God’s dealings with Israel over the centuries….Indeed, it makes no reference to the exodus or the covenant or the Torah, or to the prophets or the Day of the Lord….

In this respect it indeed belongs with Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs. These four books focus not on God’ acts in history but on questions about understanding the world and human life and about living our everyday lives…. They appeal to the way life itself is. They reflect on the nature of everyday human experience. This doesn’t mean they leave God out or leave morality out – they assume [God and morality] are part of human experience” (Goldingay).

So the book of Job is wisdom literature, poetry to encourage us to ask questions about human life, to seek understanding about our own humanity through this story of unraveling.

The story opens with a brief introduction of Job and his family. Job is wealthy, healthy, and faithful – described as being “blameless and upright,

one who feared God and turned away from evil.” He had a large family and a large household, and did everything right in terms of his faithful prayers and service to God, even interceding on behalf of his children, in case they accidentally messed up.

And then the scene shifts to God in the heavenly boardroom, and the adversary checks in. Now, our English language translates the name of this character as Satan, and we may think of the Devil, a red creature with horns and pitchfork, the enemy of God. And that’s just inaccurate, a misconception that’s caught the popular imagination over time. The character is “the adversary;” the Hebrew word is “ha satan,” which isn’t a proper name, just a normal word describing the role of this character: adversary or accuser.

And this character isn’t the adversary of God – no, in this story, this accuser character actually works *for* God, or even *with* God. Imagine a courtroom – the prosecutor isn’t in opposition to the judge – the prosecutor provides evidence so the judge can make the right ruling.

That is who “ha satan” or “Satan” is in this story. And the accuser does this assigned job, checking in with God about humankind, and when asked by God about Job, offers the idea that Job is incredibly faithful, to be sure, but isn’t it easy to be faithful and grateful when you’ve basically been handed a good life on a silver platter?

If God is concerned about people’s faithfulness, what if Job didn’t have it so great? What would Job’s faithfulness look like, if his world started to unravel?

John Goldingay points out that this is a question of covenant versus contract. God wants a *covenant* relationship with God’s people, a mutual agreement that isn’t dependent upon whims. The adversary points out that because of Job’s great wealth and prosperity, the relationship *may* actually be more of a contract: Job will serve God, because God has apparently blessed Job with unparalleled wealth.

The adversary asks, “Is Job committed to God only because of what he gets out of it? Indeed, is God committed to Job only because of what God gets out of it, because God likes having someone who makes offerings

and concerns himself with God’s standards in the world” (Goldingay)?

And in this story, God agrees with this line of questioning, and says to the adversary, “Yes, let’s investigate.” And Job’s life unravels.

It’s hard to read. He tragically loses everything – his livestock, his servants,

and his children, followed by his own physical health. And yet he didn’t curse or blame God.

Job’s wife tells him to “curse God and die,” understandable, truly, as she, too, has experienced these great losses. Three of Job’s friends show up,

and upon witnessing his terrible suffering, simply sit in silence with him for 7 days, which is an excellent example of how to care for someone who is grieving – presence, the act of showing up, is more powerful than any words.

After this silence, Job finally speaks, lamenting, despairing, cursing – not God – but the day he was born. Perhaps the gift of his friends’ time of sitting with him gave him the courage to weep, to speak aloud some of the pain he feels inside.

And at this point in the story, his friends’ good instincts shift a bit, and they end up saying some sort of stupid things – the kind of things you should never say to someone who is suffering. Things like, “Are you *sure* there isn’t some sin you’ve committed along the way that is forcing God to punish you so?” Not helpful.

Actually, in the bulk of these chapters in the book of Job, there is a lot of philosophizing about the nature of God and the nature of humans, it’s actually really interesting to read the back and forth between Job and his friends.

Job remains faithful to God, and faithful to his own integrity, despite his great suffering, and despite the arguments from his friends.

Our reading for today comes from the middle of the story, and I think it’s a turning point – Job’s recognition after much debate and contemplation

that wisdom and understanding are simply beyond him in the midst of his unraveling.

“Where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding?” When everything unravels, when we are in the midst of deep anguish, overwhelming grief, when the waters have come up to our necks, when we have lost something incredibly dear, lost not just our present but our future, as well, when it all just…*unravels*, there is no wisdom to be found. There *is* no understanding.

And after arguing with his friends and defending himself over and over,

all the while grieving his terrible losses, Job finally makes this claim:

‘Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.’”

The word “fear” here means “respect, awe.”

Job returns to what he knows best, as a person of deep faith: wisdom isn’t knowing everything about everything, being able to explain why bad things happen to “good people,” or why good things happen to “bad people,”

or why “bad” things or people happen at all in God’s good creation.

Wisdom is standing in awe before the God who created it all in the first place.

And Job claims that understanding isn’t having all the answers, even though that’s very much what he wants in this moment. Understanding is doing what God has told us to do from the very beginning – to turn away from evil, which means turning toward God.

Which is that *covenant relationship*. Turning toward God is turning toward our creator, the one who claims us and calls us and invites us to join in the work of goodness, of God’s mercy and love, turning away from evil –

from all that would harm us or cause us to harm another.

Seeking wisdom when everything unravels looks like putting aside our deep desire for answers, for explanations, and turning toward the heart of God,

howsoever we can discern it at the time.

Job has another friend show up who reminds him of this, who tells his other friends to take a hike, and reminds Job to trust in God’s power, God’s justice, and God’s wisdom.

God shows up at the end of the story – if you haven’t read it, you should –

the poetry is lovely, and God’s dialogue with Job is memorable.

And the story ends with Job’s fortunes – his health, wealth, and family – being restored, which, as we know, generally doesn’t happen in real life,

at least not quite so literally as this. And we readers are left with more questions than answers.

Thankfully, the end of this story isn’t the end of our story, and isn’t the end of the story of faith. Wisdom is standing before God in awe of God’s power and majesty, and understanding is turning toward God’s heart – God’s goodness and justice – responding to God’s call to be in relationship, not just with God but with the world God has created.

 Jesus embodied that wisdom, that understanding for us, and embodied human suffering, as well, enduring betrayal, rejection, torture, and execution. And despite experiencing the worst that humanity had to offer,

Jesus’ resurrection was a resounding NO to the power of those things, and a resounding YES to the covenant, to the enduring relationship we are invited into with the God who created us and with the world God created.

People suffer. Lives unravel. We ask questions, like Job and his friends, and rarely receive answers. I wish I had answers for you.

Wisdom is continuing to ask the questions, continuing to turn toward the heart of God even when it doesn’t make sense. Wisdom is choosing to remain in relationship, with God, with the Church, with your neighbors near and far, when everything falls apart, and, perhaps, in that precise moment when we are sure that what we need and deserve is an explanation. When we *demand* an explanation.

In this story, as Job unravels, he teaches us what it looks like to demand something better than an explanation… to demand something that might save us – and not “save” us as in whisk us back to the good old days, back to a status quo where we understood the world and ourselves in it, and our only prayers were songs of thanksgiving –

When Job’s story unravels, he doesn’t demand an explanation. Job demands the covenant. *God’s* covenant.

When the story unravels for us, when it really, really falls apart, may we reach for something beyond an explanation, too.

May we, and I say this with all fear and trembling, may we let ourselves be unraveled all the way back into relationship with God.

Wisdom is asking our questions, knowing we may get no answers, and understanding is turning ever toward the heart of God.

Thanks be to God.

**Works Cited**

Goldingay, John. *Job for Everyone*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013.