

Job: Lessons in Leadership from One of the Bible's Most Tragic Figures

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Job is arguably one of the most enigmatic figures in the Bible. Most people believe that the foremost lesson that can be learned from his story is that God's ways are mysterious and mortals cannot grasp why bad things happen to good people. This paper will demonstrate that a great deal can be learned about ethical leadership from Job's story. After all, Job was an individual of great prosperity with an enormous amount of material wealth and many employees. The Book of Job describes exactly what a person, especially a leader, must do to live an upright, righteous life.

Job is arguably one of the most perplexing books in the Bible. The Bible gives few clues as to its origin. The Talmud (Babylonian Talmud, Baba Bathra 15a-b) cites many views as to when Job lived; one opinion was that he lived in the time of Moses another view is that he was one of the returnees from the Babylonian exile after the destruction of the First Temple. One sage believed that Job never existed and the book is a parable. Ibn Ezra, a medieval commentator, believes that Job did exist since his name is cited in Ezekiel (14: 14, 20). Incidentally, it is not clear whether Job was Jewish or not; there is an argument about that in the Talmud as well. There is an opinion in the Talmud that Moses was the author of the Book of Job (Babylonian Talmud, Baba Bathra 14b). Kadari (2013) cites a Midrash that asserts that Job was married to Dinah, Jacob's daughter (Midrash Genesis Rabbah 19:12).

There is no question that the book is ancient and has many valuable lessons for humankind. It is the story of a man who loses everything in spite of his good deeds, and attempts to answer the age old question – “Why bad things happen to good people.” In Job's attempt to understand the reason for his tragedies, the reader learns many important lessons about the meaning of life and how people should live their lives.

The Book of Job starts with a description of Job. He is a wealthy man who lives in Utz and has seven sons and three daughters. Job is described as a “man of great integrity and upright character, God-fearing, and shunning evil” (Job 1: 1). He owns 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 hundred yoke of cattle, and 500 she-donkeys. He also owns much property and has many workers. With this kind of wealth, he is, quite similar in terms of lifestyle to many of today's CEOs. One day, tragedy strikes and he loses all of his possessions and even his children. All that he has left is his wife. If this is not enough tragedy, he is eventually smitten with boils all over his body.

Job wants to know the reason for his suffering. His three friends – Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite – are of the opinion that God only punishes those who are not

righteous. Thus, Job must have committed some serious transgressions to be punished so horrifically. Job has to defend himself to his friends but they stick to their theological beliefs about how God runs the universe. From Job's statements, we can see what it takes to be a righteous person.

HELPING THE POOR

The following passages indicate the importance of showing compassion for the destitute. Note that Job makes a point that he helped the orphan, widow, and destitute. This is why Job was surprised at the calamities that befell him. The Midrash describes Job as a person who builds an inn to provide hospitality to strangers. The inn has a door on each side to make sure that strangers will feel welcome and have no trouble finding a way in (Birnbaum, 1976: 189).

Why does the Almighty not set times for judgment? Why must those who know him look in vain for such days? There are those who move boundary stones; they pasture flocks they have stolen.

They drive away the orphan's donkey and take the widow's ox in pledge. They thrust the needy from the path and force all the poor of the land into hiding. Like wild donkeys in the desert, the poor go about their labor of foraging food; the wasteland provides food for their children. They [the laborers of the wicked] harvest the wheat fields and glean in the vineyards of the wicked. Lacking clothes, they spend the night naked; they have nothing to cover themselves in the cold. They are drenched by mountain rains and hug the rocks for lack of shelter. The fatherless child is snatched from the breast; the infant of the poor is seized for a debt. Lacking clothes, they go about naked; they carry the sheaves of wheat, but still go hungry. They crush olives among the terraces; they tread the winepresses, yet suffer thirst. The groans of the people rise from the city, and the souls of the wounded cry out for help. But God charges no one with wrongdoing (Job 24: 1-12).

Never have I withheld the poor from their desire, or have caused the eyes of the widow to fail; nor have eaten my morsel alone, and the orphan has not shared it. But from my youth I reared them as a father would, and from my birth I guided the widow. Did I see anyone perishing for lack of clothing, or the needy without garments, whose loins did not bless me for warming them with the shearings from my sheep? If I have ever raised my hand against the orphan, knowing that I had influence in court, then let my arm fall from the shoulder, let it be broken off at the joint. (Job 31: 16-20).

Because they turned away from following Him, and they did not understand any of His ways. They caused the cry of the poor to come before Him, so that He heard the cry of the needy (Job 34: 27-28).

In chapter 24, Job describes the vicious ways the wicked harm others. Among their misdeeds is how they mistreat laborers. These poor laborers have to work at night unclothed and are constantly hungry. Job, of course, does not treat his laborers in such a manner; this is why he questions how God runs the world. Job could be describing the greedy CEOs who plundered their companies in order to maximize their bonuses and had no problem closing down factories. This is probably the most important lesson of Job: one is obligated to help the needy and be especially concerned with the welfare of laborers. How many people today can claim that they were "the father to the needy"?

In chapter 34, Elihu, someone who has been listening to the discussions and now decides it is time for him to join in, states that God does hear the cry of the needy. However, in a world of free choice, it is necessary for God to be discreet about how and when perpetrators of evil against the weak are punished. Besides, God expects humans to band together to create a just legal system and use it to eradicate evil (Weisberg & Kazarnovsky, 2012). In the words of Elihu (Job 35:9): “People will unite in the face of oppression, and they will cry out to be rescued from the oppressors’ strong hand.” Job accepts that God punishes those who ignore the plight of the disadvantaged, but he has not been guilty of this offense.

JUSTICE FOR ALL

Because I rescued the pauper who cried for help, and the orphan who had no one to assist him (Job 29: 12).

I was a father to the needy; and the cause of him that I knew not I would investigate. (Job 29: 16).

I broke the fangs of the wicked and plucked the prey from the grip of his teeth (Job 29: 17).

If I have rejected the cause of my manservant or my maidservant, when they brought a complaint against me, what then shall I do when God rises up? When he makes inquiry, what shall I answer him? Did not He who made me in the womb make him, And the same one fashion us in the womb? (Job 31: 13-15).

It is not enough to take care of the poor and needy; one has to fight for justice. It seems that victims of oppressors came to Job and he would investigate. Injustices against the weaker members of society were of great concern to Job and he helped others deal with wrongs. Many wealthy people treat servants as possessions and show them no respect. Job regarded his servants as his equals since God made everyone. This lofty ideal of the brotherhood and unity of all of humankind is also expressed in Malachi (2:10). Job recognized that it was morally wrong to treat any human being badly because everyone—master and servant – was created by God. This is why Job was careful not to abuse the rights of his male and female servants.

NEVER GIVING UP

Naked I emerged from my mother’s womb, and naked I shall return.
The Lord gave and the Lord took; may the name of the Lord be blessed (Job 1: 21).

Shall we also only accept the good from God and not accept the evil? (Job 2:10).

Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him; I will surely defend my ways to his face (Job 13:15).

The first statement is one of the most powerful statements in all of Scripture. At this point, Job has lost his wealth and children. One commentary notes that Job was not complaining about the loss of his children and possessions since he was not born with them. Job recognizes that both are gifts from God and that he has to be thankful for what he was given (Rosenberg, 1989: 9). His response to his wife in verse (2:10) is a reaction to her statement that he should curse God. However, when he is later afflicted

with severe boils all over his body and is in great pain, he no longer blesses God. He cannot start all over again with this illness.

FAITHFUL TO HIS MARRIAGE

I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully upon any maiden (Job 31:1).

If my heart has been enticed by a woman, or if I have lurked at my neighbor's door [to commit adultery with his wife], then may my wife grind for someone else, and may others kneel over her [i.e., commit adultery with her]. For that is lewdness, a sin to be judged. It is a fire that consumes to destruction; it would have uprooted my grain (Job 31: 9-12).

Satan was permitted to test Job's faith. He was allowed to kill Job's children but did not harm Job's wife. Interestingly, Job's wife told her husband to "curse God and die" (Job 2:9). Apparently, she was being sarcastic since Job had blessed God after his first misfortune. It should be noted that she also suffered greatly. She was affected just as much as Job was with the loss of the children and wealth. Moreover, she now had to take care of a sick husband who was covered with boils. She also had to deal with the fetid breath caused by his illness. Job remarks (19:17): "My breath is offensive to my wife; I am loathsome to my own family."

Job states that he has been faithful to his wife and that he never allowed himself to be seduced by any women. In fact, he asserts that if he did ever succumb to a married woman then he deserves a horrible fate that includes the fact that his wife will be unfaithful to him and that everything he possesses should be destroyed. Job uses the metaphor of "a fire that consumes to destruction" to describe the sin of licentiousness. Once a person gives in to his evil impulse and commits adultery, it becomes all-consuming and he becomes obsessed. The punishment is measure for measure and he loses everything he has, including his own wife.

HUMILITY

"If I have put my trust in gold or said to pure gold, 'You are my security,' if I have rejoiced over my great wealth, the fortune my hands had gained,... then these also would be sins to be judged, for I would have been unfaithful to God on high." (Job 31: 24-28).

Job says that he was never obsessed with acquiring wealth and did not allow his great wealth to spoil him. He understood that wealth came from God and man should not claim (Deuteronomy 8:17): "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me."

CONCLUSION

Throughout the story, Job desperately wants to understand the reason for his suffering. More importantly, however, he wants his friends to know that he was indeed innocent of any serious transgressions. He constantly claims to be a righteous person. In doing so, he makes it very clear what it takes to be an upright individual. God answers Job from a whirlwind and informs him that "absolute wisdom is found with God alone, and that man by reason of his finite intelligence cannot fathom the infinite wisdom of God, or comprehend the mystery of His rule" (Reichert, 1978: 195). After all, Job was not there when the "foundations of the earth" were laid by God (Job 38: 4). It is presumptuous of Job to criticize when there are so many things about nature that Job could not begin to comprehend. The story of

Job teaches us how to live the righteous life. Job, after all, was a righteous man. His three friends were rebuked by God for saying that suffering necessarily suggests that someone has sinned (Job 42: 7-10). God refers to Job as his “servant” (Job 42: 7, 42: 8, 42: 9), the highest form of praise for a mortal. Job is made twice as prosperous as before.

The book does make it quite clear what it takes to be called a righteous person and servant of God by the Lord himself. Every CEO and leader should read the book of Job as a way to remain humble and recognize how easy it is to lose one’s wealth. What it takes to be a righteous person is to be concerned with the plight of the weak and helpless. This includes orphans, widows, servants, strangers, and employees. Leaders have to fight against all kinds of injustices against the disadvantaged and have to correct any injustices done to their employees. One also has to be honest in all matters including marriage; philandering distracts leaders from their mission and can have adverse consequences. Birnbaum (1976: 189) discusses the virtues enumerated by Job. They include: “a blameless family life, consideration for the poor and weak, charity, modesty, generosity, hospitality to strangers, honesty and just dealings.”

Research by Adam Grant (2013) on productivity and success shows that the most successful people are “givers.” Givers are individuals who enjoy helping others without requiring or expecting reciprocity. In other words, they follow in the footsteps of Job who always cared for others; he was a “giver.” Sadly, Americans are losing empathy for the poor. Susan Fiske, a prominent researcher at Princeton, studied how people really feel about the poor and homeless. She hooked up subjects to neuro-imaging machines and showed them photographs of the indigent. Her research showed that Americans “react to poverty not with sympathy but with revulsion” (Kristof, 2013). What would Job say to that? America is a land of immigrants and most of our families arrived with very little money. Friedman (2013) asserts that a country that hopes to prosper has to commit itself to helping the poorest and weakest members of society. In fact, the Bible has special rules regarding concern for four categories of people: the poor, the widow and orphan, the Levite, and the stranger. This love for the disadvantaged members of society is what Friedman (2013) refers to as the “Second Golden Rule” of the Bible and this is what Job believed.

The story of Job has a message about happiness. Social scientists have been studying happiness for more than 40 years. Since 1972, the University of Chicago has been conducting the General Social Survey of Americans; one of the measures deals with happiness (Brooks, 2013). Much of happiness – about 48% -- is genetic. What does not help happiness much is wealth. Money makes us happy if we are very poor; but once we reach a middle class income, even large amounts of additional money do not add much to one’s happiness. What makes people happy includes: (1) faith, (2) family, and (3) community, and (4) rewarding, fulfilling work (Brooks, 2013). Job was especially distressed because of what his friends believed to be true about him and because his faith in a just God was shattered. It was not only about the loss of wealth and family. In the end, everything changes. Reichert (1978: 195) observes that out of sorrow and suffering he has come to know God, not only in His blazing majesty but in his boundless love. Job’s pride has vanished and in the vision of God, affirming his integrity, he attains spiritual victory and triumphant faith.

Once Job comes to know God and his faith returns, he can die “old and satiated with years” (Job 42:17). Leaders who wish to die content and fulfilled have to live a life dedicated to helping others. As Brooks (2013) notes: “Few dying patients regret overinvesting in rich family lives, community ties and spiritual journeys.”

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