

JOB 42: 7-17 (Conclusion)

If you take out chapters 3 - 42:6 and just add 42: 7-17 to the end of chapter 2, you would virtually have a shorter story of Job. The language of chapters 1,2,42 are very much the same, and very much different than 3-42. The name for God is different. Job's integrity has a different emphasis. Job is restored exactly double what he had in detail, and he has exactly the same number of sons and daughters as before his misfortune. The one difference is that where his wife had spoken "foolishly" in chapter 2, it is his friends who have spoken "foolishly" by chapter 42. There is also no longer need to mention Satan as he has served his purpose.

We may also have difficulty squaring how Job is rewarded materially as if his friends' argument all along makes sense – repent and God will restore you again. Or else, Job was, indeed, innocent and he is rewarded by God. His friends spoke about him falsely and they are condemned.

However... there is also good reason to see 42: 7-17 as a genuine response to what came before. Here are some reasons.

1) God's mercy was brought into question by Job. Even if people do make mistakes, he had argued, where is God's mercy? People are flawed after all, everyone makes mistakes. Well, in 42: 7-9, God condemns Job's friends, but also offers a way toward forgiveness and reconciliation. Ironically, it is the Job the friends accused who is the very means to their receiving forgiveness and the possibility of reconciliation. Job, true to his character and his integrity, not only offers prayers on his friends behalf, but chooses to be reconciled with them.

2) God, indeed, vindicates Job before his friends, just as Job has asked with prayerful protest and tears throughout 3-31. Job's friends had challenged him to repent and come clean so that he could get right with God and be restored. The irony is that they are challenged to repent, and in order to be restored, Job has to pray for them, indicating Job's innocence and integrity. Repentance is not just before God but in relation to the person one has wronged. That person's prayer of acceptance on our behalf has great value before God. Of course, that person may not accept our repentance and that's another issue. But for genuine reconciliation to happen, which is the highest goal of repentance and forgiveness, the person wronged must accept our repentance.

3) At the end, Job is blameless and upright, just as he was at the beginning. However, he is wiser, and he bears scars from his losses and wounds. His whole outlook about the world and about reality has changed. He also has a broader and deeper understanding of God. There is no longer self-righteousness - I am living the blessings I deserve – but an understanding of grace – all blessings are undeserved, they are gifts for which humble thanksgiving ought to be offered. We

get a glimpse of this change because part of Job's restoration includes the sympathy and comfort he receives from family and friends (42:11). One who is self-righteous, "strong", "self-sufficient" does not need sympathy and comfort. He is too proud and isolated.

4) Job was right to insist on his integrity and his innocence. He was right to insist that God would not welcome the deceit of admitting to some error for the sake of finding some relief from God, like children admit to something wrong in order to get off more lightly. Job was right to protest his innocent suffering and to resist its destructive power as something evil and wrong. Job was right to expect his friends support by recognizing his integrity and the injustice of his suffering.

Job was also right that God does not act on the principle of retributive justice (you get what you deserve). The universe is much more complex, and it is a place where there is room for both good and evil alike. But there is also room for grace for both good and evil alike, as well as a place for forgiveness and reconciliation, for growth in sympathy and compassion, for wisdom in the face of life's limitations. Goodness, as the philosopher Plato said, is its own reward, and evil is its own curse. Those who cut themselves off from love live cursed lives no matter how many people they climb over to get to the top. A tyrant, Plato also said, is the most unhappy person in the world, because he has cut himself off from everyone else. The only people left around him are those who say "yes, yes". There is no room for mutuality or equality. And genuine mutuality and equality requires the back and forth trust and flow that comes from love. We have a capacity for love as human beings, but it must be grown and developed. It is not given us in full bloom. Life is not a journey toward success, it is a journey toward a deepening and a wisdom in the practice and acceptance of love.

5) Finally, God is not unfair because there is space in this universe even for the wicked to prosper, and for the innocent to suffer. Rather, God is generous. This divine generosity is reciprocated by Job. Job's 3 daughters receive an equal portion of his inheritance to his 7 sons. In a time and place where only sons received inheritances, and according to age, while the women were left dependent on the men, Job breaks rank and gives to everyone equally and impartially. This is the same equality and impartiality with which God gives to all the living. As Jesus says of God in the gospels: "God makes the rain fall and the sun shine on good and evil alike." (Matthew 5:45)

Thank God we do not live in a world where we have to look over our shoulder, focusing on those who are worse than us so that we can feel more safe, but fearful of those who may be better than us in case we are found wanting. Job's God, the God Jesus reveals to us through his words and actions, this is the God we are invited to believe in and place our trust as we live in a world that is wonderfully fearful, yet infinitely wonderful in its unpredictability.