

SUMMARY OF JOB 1 – 7

by Revd Dr Elaine Colechin

When you're laid like a piece of old meat on the slab,
And they'll cut and they'll slice, and they'll poke and they'll jab,
And they'll grill ye and burn ye, and they'll wish ye good health,
With their radium, chemo and God knows what else?

Well ye can't fault the science, though the logic is weak,
Is it really an eternal life we should seek?

These lyrics from a song by the artist Sting offer a contemporary expression of the point Job reaches in the opening chapters of his story. As he sat in the dust, ill and broken, Job declared he would rather have the emptiness of death than the life of pain that he was experiencing. He might have been alive, but he was not living! It is a grim reality that we would not wish on anyone. Yet from hospices to hospitals, refugee camps to homeless shelters, front rooms to coffee shops, it is a reality for far too many people, and we are all looking for someone to blame.

The story of Job opens up the challenging dialogue among people of faith about why bad things happen. It also raises many questions regarding the human condition and being the creation of God. Although the land of Uz and Job are referred to in other books of the Old Testament, they should not be thought of any more than a character in a land far, far away. The story of Job is a philosophical, poetic epic that inspires the reader to grapple with life, the universe and everything from a very personal place in a character to whom one can relate.

In Chapter 1, the character of Job is introduced. He is an individual who has everything and gets everything right. Maybe appears to be too perfect but without him portrayed as thus what the author encourages the reader to struggle with would make the story more complex!

The narrative moves very quickly. From the introduction of Job, as readers we are taken to a scene in heaven one might not expect to find in the Bible. God is challenged that no human can be as perfect as Job is made out to be. God's response: Test him! The character referred to as Satan does just this and Job finds everything that completes him—wealthy and family—gone. The expectation is that Job would then curse God in his grief. Instead, we read Job praising God! “The Lord gives, the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord!” (Job 1:21)

Chapter 2 begins back in heaven. There is a repetition of the challenge to God and God's response. This time though, what afflicts Job is what probably can be the hardest to deal with—the loss of health and dignity. Grief can be worn publicly, but illness, not so, especially in the culture of the Israelites who would have first been told this tale. As an outcast, surly Job would curse God. No, “only good,” Job professed, “would come from God's hand.” (Job 2.10)

The heart wrenching moment of this chapter then comes. Lost, despondent, in great pain, Job sits in the dust and ashes, but not alone. Three friends join him. Their actions align with ancient customs, yet in their watchful vigil the reader witnesses an outpouring of genuine empathy.

As we move into chapter 3, a change appears to have come over Job. The seven days of silence appears not to have been a healing experience for Job. Job could not explain why all those things had happened to him and what he was feeling he needed to get off his chest.

In this first speech of Job's there is imagery related to creation which pops up again later in story. There is also the play on what God protects—Job's life. What is life when all you are experiencing is trauma and loss? Better not to have life! The other thing of note is although Job does not specifically blame God, what we hear in his voice is an undercurrent of challenge to God which grows as the story progresses.

In chapters 4 and 5, we read the first of Job's friends' reactions to Job's unburdening. In Eliphaz's first speech, Job's pain is recognised. All that Job had achieved to that point, Eliphaz tried to celebrate. He tried to give Job hope. But central to what Eliphaz says is an acknowledgement that humanity is fallible, and Job should recognise that within himself. Eliphaz encourages Job to seek God's healing by maybe asking why but also by owning his iniquities.

As one might expect, this did not go down well with Job. Chapters 6 and 7 are Job's response to Eliphaz words. Following on from what happened at the end of chapter 2, Job sees Eliphaz's suggestions as a snub on their friendship. Now, it is worth noting that friendship in the Ancient Near East was more of business arrangement than our understanding, although some of what is played out in the conversation could very easily play out in the relationships we define as friendships. Job defends his integrity. If he had done something wrong in the eyes of God, he wanted God to tell him. Job may not be cursing God, but Job begins to demand of God a reason. In this one of the tensions within the narrative becomes apparent—God's action being unjust.

Maybe a better response for both Eliphaz and Job to Job's afflictions, would be the response of the priest to the trial he was facing in the song we started with:

Our mission is more than a struggle for breath,
For a few extra rounds in a fight to the death.
When our mission is love, and compassion and grace,
It's not a test of endurance, or a marathon race.
For love is the sabre, and love is the shield,
Love is the only true power we wield,
An eternal love is all ye should seek ...

Although, given the scenes in heaven, love, at the moment, does not much come into this tale of the relationship between God and Job.

Lyrics from "So to Speak" by Sting from Album "The Last Ship", 2013