**Job 7:1-7** February 7, 2021

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*Job 7:1[Job replied,] “Does not man have hard service on earth? Are not his days like those of a hired man? 2Like a slave longing for the evening shadows, or a hired man waiting eagerly for his wages, 3so I have been allotted months of futility, and nights of misery have been assigned to me. 4When I lie down I think, ‘How long before I get up?’ The night drags on, and I toss till dawn. 5My body is clothed with worms and scabs, my skin is broken and festering.*

*6“My days are swifter than a weaver’s shuttle, and they come to an end without hope. 7Remember, O God, that my life is but a breath; my eyes will never see happiness again.”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**A Message from the Ash Heap**

When you are a kid—if you are the kind of kid whose parents bring you to Sunday School and read Bible history devotions at home—you eventually find out about this guy in the Bible named Job (like Rob), except all the adults insist on pronouncing his name Job (like Robe). And you know that if you ever came across this word j-o-b in English class and pronounced it Job (like Robe), your teacher would look at you like you had just lost your mind. You figure it just goes to prove that adults like to make rules, and then for no apparent reason, ignore their own rules and wonder why you don’t get it.

That all being what it is, the story of this man with the strange name is so powerful that even our irreligious world still has the saying: “the patience of Job.” Well, today, we find that Job’s patience maybe wasn’t as ironclad as we thought.

You see, the Biblical book of Job covers 42 chapters. Thirty-nine plus of those chapters are Hebrew poetry. Hebrew poetry isn’t for everybody! So, what happens is that people read the non-poetry parts of the book—the first two chapters and the last half chapter. They ignore the other 39½ and call it good. Which, speaking of school days, is a habit we learned back freshman year in high school, right? Read the first couple chapters of an English assignment, get bored, and skip to half way through the last chapter. And then we try to bluff our way through English class, pretending we knew what the story was all about. That’s what has happened with this eighteenth book of the Bible, the book of Job.

So, today’s reading might shock people who thought they knew the story of Job and his patience. It turns out that his patience had its dents and dings.

Which is a far more light-hearted beginning to this sermon than is proper. But maybe that is my way of trying to cope with the suffocating sorrow of this reading, the reading that begins, ***“Does not man have hard service on earth?...”*** and continues, ***“My body is clothed with worms and scabs…”*** and closes out ***“My eyes will never see happiness again.”*** I didn’t start with a lighthearted introduction to disrespect Job, it’s just that I can’t cope with it. How about you? Sorrow this great makes us uneasy. We want to move on to the next subject, or the next reading. This isn’t the sort of thing that people come to church to hear.

Yes, how often I hear people say that they feel that coming to God’s house lifts them up, gives them hope, helps them see their way through the challenges of life. Me too! And so, when every three years in our cycle of Scripture readings it comes time to read this Word of God from Job chapter seven, I have an almost allergic reaction. I think, “No one wants to hear about that. Christians want a positive message, one that builds up.”

That is why I have never even been tempted to preach on Job chapter seven. In fact, I have consciously avoided it. But this year I realized that I am going to have to make peace with this word of God, Job chapter 7. I hope you can too. As we look at this chapter, I believe we will find some very good reasons to allow Job to speak to us from his sorrow

**A Message from the Ash Heap**

Why the ash heap? In just a moment. Let’s start by reminding ourselves why Job feels this way.

For the seven days before our reading (2:13), Job three of his friends have been almost speechless. In a day, all of Job’s wealth had been lost. If not a billionaire in today’s money, he had been close. In a single day it was all lost. On that same day, all his children were killed. A day or two later Job came down with a disease of oozing painful sores breaking out over his entire body. Job was so distraught that his pained body came to rest in the ashes of a trash heap and he sat there scratching his sores with a broken piece of pottery. It would have brought tears to your eyes. He friends showed up and for a while they couldn’t say anything.

How great his sorrow! How much more so for his previous prosperity! You know, our family used to live in Africa. We were rich. We Americans were fantastically rich. And one could never help but feel a little guilty about it. As a pastor I desperately tried avoid any appearance of flaunting my wealth. But the fact couldn’t be avoided. There was something very special that would happen when bad things would happen to me, to us. You would think, perhaps, that people who lived in grinding poverty would kind of think somewhere back in their hearts, “Well, it’s not all bad for these rich Azungu (that’s what we were called) to learn how the other half live.” That’s what you would almost expect. And maybe for a moment that’s what they felt, I don’t know. But it’s like they would try even harder to comfort us than others. As if to say in all humility, “We, we are used to suffering. That’s every day for us. But it must be tough when you have never felt it” or so they seemed to imagine, and it’s like they tried extra hard to sympathize, imagining that perhaps we felt the sorrow even worse for not being used to it. Maybe so.

But that’s what I imagine it was for Job. Some might think that a rich man can’t feel sorrow, not really. But I imagine that when sorrow finally camped out on Job’s doorstep, he felt it even worse. He had never known a plan to go wrong, had a hungry day, felt people look down their noses at him. And now it all came upon him in a day.

Maybe that why he cries out from the ash heap, ***“Does not man have hard service on earth?”*** In the Bible, this word for “hard service” usually applies to military service, the sort you are conscripted into. The sort where the recruiters show up with pickup trucks and handcuffs, and if you happen to be out on the street, you suddenly find yourself in an army uniform in a foreign country, fighting not so much for your country as for survival. ***“Does not man have hard service on earth? Are not his days like those of a hired man? Like a slave longing for the evening shadows… When I lie down I think, ‘How long before I get up?’ The night drags on, and I toss till dawn.”*** Every sorrowful feels life an eternity.

Then he contradicts himself, ***“My days are swifter than a weaver’s shuttle…”*** Just to explain that: if you had been in Bible class this morning, you would have a better idea what that means (https://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=7O98vJ8VEF4), but here it is… Weaving in the ancient world meant that if you were weaving, let’s say, a blanket, you would have hundreds of threads going one way. Then you would have to run a thread cross-wise. It has to go over and under every single one of those hundreds of threads. By hand, that would take hours to just do a couple rows. A loom was a machine that used a shuttle to do an entire row in perhaps a second. Massively faster – like airplane travel to the West Coast compared to walking to the West Coast. Job looks on his life of misery and says, ***“My days are swifter than a weaver’s shuttle.”*** The lack of purpose and lack of accomplishment turns his many days into a gray blur.

Which is a contradiction. He had just complained that he felt like a slave whose every day lasts forever, and now complains that the days race along too fast to notice. How strange, except this makes perfect sense if you have lived in that deep sorrow, in that place of depression.

Chapter seven, and most of these 39 chapters of Hebrew poetry are full of these comfortless words breathing the coldness of death. You read it, you hear it, and you ask, “Are these good words? Are these words that a Christian can speak? Or are these a mark of someone who has lost faith?”

That question begs for an answer. It is an answer that you as Christians instinctively know. Perhaps you have felt a loved one lash out at you because of their sorrow, their pain, their feeling of injustice. You know they lash out, not for lack of love, but because you are the only person close enough to hear their heart’s pain, and they need someone to hear it, so you bear the brunt of their attack. That does not make it right. But you know what is going on. So in your own heart you forgive that person, not because it was ok, but because you are going to temporarily surrender some of your honor and suffer with them.

We know that Job, too, speaks from the deepest, darkest sorrow of his heart. That does not make his complaints right. But he speaks from human weakness. So while wrong and sin (and Job would repent in chapter 42), we know it is not a sign of unbelief. God is forgiving.

But what is the answer to Job’s sorrow? That is the core problem of this reading. In this reading there is no answer, no resolution, no hope. This is what makes me as a preacher so afraid of the Bible reading.

Yet if you continue to read in through the Hebrew poetry of Job, through another twelve chapters of sorrow and friends with unhelpful advice, you come to chapter 19. There a solid ray of sunshine bursts through the dark winter skies so brightly that you will have to squint your eyes, even while you praise God for the sunshine on a day of clouds.

In chapter 19, somehow God breaks through Job’s sorrow and inspires him to say, *“I know that my Redeemer lives… And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God.”* For a moment his sorrow recedes and he feels the joy that every Christian knows in the darkest hours. We will live, and all this will pass away and slough off of us and we will be renewed. Job fixes a firm grip on this truth, and because he can feel the waters of sorrow again rising, he shouts out some of my favorite words in the entire Bible, *“Oh, that my words were recorded, that they were written on a scroll, that they were inscribed with an iron tool on lead, or engraved in rock forever! I know that my Redeemer lives.”* He is again going to feel the pain and the sorrow and all the rest, but he knows that his feelings don’t change truth, and he wants that truth to conquer his pain. The truth is that God has redeemed him from his sins and from death and from the power of the devil. He, Job, will one day burst the bonds of death and live a life not subject to any of the pains and sorrows of this life. In the meantime he will waver. He will hurt. But these enduring truths will stand firm.

Then we remember more of God’s truth and sure promises, words from outside of the entire book of Job; words of today’s psalm, Psalm 103, *“As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust… he does not treat us as our sins deserve”* (13-14,10)

We remember the Gospel reading, where Jesus kept on encountering people, each in his or her own unique troubles in life. He addressed each of their needs and then drew them to the bigger and better truths. He drew them not merely to health and happiness, but beyond those to something else. He declared, *“Let us go somewhere else so I can preach… That is why I have come.”* (Mk 1:38) He came to shine the enduring good news of salvation through a Savior into a dark and suffering world.

And so Job chapter seven reminds us that yes, someone like Job, someone feeling the weight of life gone bad, someone who cannot help but that words of complaint escape their gritted teeth, complaining in the bitterness of heart, even while pleading with the one they call Savior… That one too, Jesus is pleased to call his own.

That’s the message from the ash heap. Amen.