

Ordinary 30B: Job 42:1-6, 10-17

## **New daughters and sons do not take the place of the lost ones. As a conclusion to the story of Job, this will not do.**

by [Patrick J. Willson](#) in the [October 14, 2015](#) issue

The ending of Job simply won't do. It is not satisfactory. The narrator tries to conceal its shortcomings by inventorying Job's newfound flocks (14,000 sheep! 6,000 camels!), by distracting us with Job's three beautiful daughters. Maybe the poetry of 40 chapters has so arrested our imagination that we won't recall chapter 1 and everything lost there.

But we do remember—how a great wind struck where Job's "sons and daughter were eating and drinking," how they died in the collapse of that house. We understand when houses collapse and we build new ones. We rebuild, marry again, have children, and go on with life, but there is no evading the terrible loss. School goes on this fall in Charleston. Life goes on and new things happen, good things, but there is no replacing what is lost. New daughters and sons do not take the place of the lost ones.

As a conclusion to the story of Job, this will not do. Surely the narrator must recognize this.

The story could have come to a quite reasonable denouement early on, in the second chapter. Job's wife proposes the possibility: "Curse God, and die" (2:9). The narrator does not elaborate on the exact phrasing required for cursing God, but we know some words that might do. We've thought them, even if we have not spoken them aloud or prayed them to whatever deity might be paying vague attention. We have known bad days and worse nights when, feeling cursed by God, we would gladly return the favor.

We don't know the words to the magic formula to make it happen. For several seasons on Broadway, the cast of *The Book of Mormon* has sung an unprintable

curse without apparent casualties. We know curses of all sorts, but the curse that once and for all sunders the relationship with God and allows us the quiet mercy of death we do not know. The words are hidden from us. Regrettably, aching, thankfully, they are not in our power.

Cursing God and dying would not be a very good ending to the story anyway. Perhaps the narrator tried early drafts telling the tale that way, but everyone said they had heard that story before and knew how it came out, and it wasn't a very good story.

Some of the people in the narrator's audience might have been satisfied with the ending to the story proposed by Job's comforters. God is right and Job is wrong, therefore Job needs to get right with God. "Does God pervert justice?" Bildad asks (8:3), though it is not much of a question, just an enticement to a rhetorical contest with a predictable ending in Bildad's favor. Bildad's prescription is pure orthodoxy: "If you will seek God and make supplication to the Almighty, if you are pure and upright surely then God will . . . restore you to your rightful place" (8:5-6). "If . . . then": it's all so simple. Everyone knows this; everyone has always known this (8:8, 10).

Surely Bildad must be right. We find this theology all through the scriptures. It is enshrined in catechisms and confessions. We've heard Bildad's sermon before; some of us have even preached it. All Job needs to do is turn to God and be restored to the community of those who have been tamed and tamped down by this theology that specializes in answers. The problem is we know better. The first verse of Job declares Job is "blameless and upright." And we sense in our hearts that this is not so simple a matter as Job's friends wish it were. The ending they propose is familiar, but its bankruptcy is evident not only to us but even to God, who tells the friends, "You have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has."

What Job has said right in his many splendid speeches is by no means clear. Job may not have cursed God, but he cursed the day of his birth, the announcement of his birth, and his very existence. With thoughtful and sometimes delightfully sarcastic ripostes he has deflated the theological wisdom of his friends. He pleads for a once-and-for-all showdown with the Almighty, and here at the end he receives what he asked for—which is nothing less than God. Job has consistently refused the comfort of the "comforters" and their assurance that if he surrenders, then everything will be all right once again. Instead Job howls to the heavens in protest.

In one of Elie Wiesel's parables, God explains to Satan that the difference between the pure and the impure is that the pure protest without knowing if anyone listens. "Protest itself," God says, "contains a spark of truth, a spark of holiness, a spark of God." Job's protest is as wild as the wild creatures God points out, as untamed as Behemoth and Leviathan, and Job will not be content with anything less than God. The restoration here at the conclusion—all those camels and donkeys, seven more sons and three beautiful daughters—is not enough. Because as the story makes clear, this is not what Job wanted, not in the first place and not now at the end.

It is not a satisfactory conclusion. It is simply the best the narrator can do, because there are no words to describe the happy ending. And as Job has come to understand, only God can write the ending that way.