

## **“Victory in the Valley”**

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*A reflection for an annual Memorial Service*

Job 13.28-14.17

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Have you heard things like these?

*At least she lived a long life.  
At least he is in a better place.  
At least you can have another child.  
At least her suffering is over.  
At least. . . .*

We say things like these when we don't know what to say. But do they help? Do they lighten the pain of loss? Do they actually reveal a sunny edge to a terrible cloud?

There might be truth to them. But still. . . .

Yes, her life was long. For that, we give thanks. But still, without her we ache.

Yes, he is in a better place. For us who live in the hope of God, that assurance is precious. But still, he is not here, and that tears at us.

Barb and I lost a child to a miscarriage. Later, we were blessed with another. But still, that's not a “make-up” for our child who died.

Yes, death ends a person's suffering. Ending suffering is good. But still, what a price to pay.

But still. . . . But still. . . . Death is terrible! You know that! So terrible, we come up with things to say to take the edge away. They don't work. They can hurt more than help.

With these, we are trying to go around death. We can't. We only help by going through it, together.

### II

We are going to hear a reading from the Book of Job. This is ancient Jewish wisdom. It is among the world's literary treasures. It still speaks.

This poor guy, Job. He was honest, he had integrity, he was good and he revered God. He had ten grown children, for whom he prayed daily. He was also very rich.

One day he lost everything. All his wealth, destroyed. All his children, killed. His body, covered in sores.<sup>1</sup>

Three friends came to him. Seven days and seven nights, they sat with him in perfect silence.

Then they started explaining. The silence broke. They explained, and explained, and explained. These “wise elders,” claimed to explain to him the meaning of his tragedy. Later on, a younger fellow butted in with the unshakable wisdom of youth. They offered their best answers, all the world’s wisdom about why such things would happen to Job.

Again and again, Job told them how wrong they were. Their certain explanations did not help.

And again and again, Job spoke to God. Job was brokenhearted and bewildered, agonizing and angry at God. It seemed God had become his enemy! He looked to the heavens and confronted God with accusations! He cried the “Why?” that has called from shattered bodies, and spilled blood, and sorrowful hearts through all the ages. Job cried out “Why?” to God. And Job was faithful.

### III

Let’s hear part of Job’s cry. This is about the finality of death.<sup>2</sup>

You can read [Job 13.28-14.17 here](#).

In short, Job is saying this. *Yes, chopped-down trees can sprout again. Bulbs become flowers. Seeds become trees. Cocoons become butterflies. Winter becomes spring. But us? No. We die, lie down, and we do not get up. God, You made human life short, and our days hard. Since I’ve got so little to live, God, can’t You at least leave me alone? Or, maybe You’ll remember me? Long for me? Forgive me? Restore me?*

Ever want to complain angrily to God? Well, the Bible beat you to it. And Job was faithful.

God does not speak until the end of the book. Job has been hurling questions against God. God finishes with questions for Job. Very quickly Job realizes, and we along with him, how little we know, how little we can know, and how much we cannot hope to understand.

Still, Job’s crying out against God gets God’s approval. Job has done well.

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<sup>1</sup> The book frames Job’s suffering as as a troubling test of humanity, with Job representing the best of us. When everything God had given him was taken from him, would Job remain faithful to God?

<sup>2</sup> In the Book of Job especially, it is important to pay attention to who is speaking. The words of the friends and Job are compelling and evocative. Yet at the end of the book, God challenges what they have said. Still, they give voice to many of our own thoughts, and so are useful for us

IV

His, friends, on the other hand . . . God rebukes them.

When they showed up, sat with Job, and grieved together, they were doing well.

Then they spoke. They claimed to explain things they never understood. That's when they went wrong.

Nicholas Wolterstorff's son Eric died. Here is something he wrote:

*Don't say it's not really so bad. Because it is. Death is awful, demonic. If you think your task as comforter is to tell me that really, all things considered, it's not so bad, you do not sit with me in my grief but place yourself off in the distance away from me. Over there, you are of no help. What I need to hear from you is that you recognize how painful it is. I need to hear from you that you are with me in my desperation. To comfort me, you have to come close. Come sit beside me on my mourning bench.<sup>3</sup>*

*I will not look away. I will indeed remind myself that there is more to life than pain. I will accept joy. But I will not look away from Eric's death. Its demonic awfulness I will not ignore. I owe that—to him and to God.<sup>4</sup>*

A person dies and a universe collapses. A beautiful song silences. A magical story stops. Irreplaceable, they are gone. We are left without them.

The Book of Job gives no answer, except that wisdom about such things is God's alone. Hey, we can't get basic things about the world, or the human heart. So how can we hope to fathom God and God's ways?

But we can sit together, in love and pain. And sit with God.

Job sat with God. He despaired. But he stayed with God. Better, God stayed with him.

IV

In the reading, Job asked a question, a question that can point us forward.

*If people die, will they live again?*

What's the answer? Did Job assume the answer is "No! They will not live again." All the evidence we have points to that terrible conclusion.

But, God is wise to such things.

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<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, Lament for a Son (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 34.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 54.

So even as Job despaired, *“If people die, will they live again?”* God knew the wonderful answer.

You can read the selections from [1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15 here](#).

God’s answer to death is not to go around its brutal truth. So we don’t have to either. Grieve. Continue to grieve. Grieve together. And be healed as you grieve.

Nor does God leave us to despair. Grieve, with hope.<sup>5</sup>

God’s answer to death is not to go around it. Instead, in person, in Jesus, God walked right into the valley of the shadow of death, right into its terrible storm, and submitted to its ferocious fury.

And in the valley God was victorious over death with resurrection. Jesus’ resurrection, and he’s just the beginning. In the valley, God defeated death for us who are living. In the valley, God defeated death for those who have died.

Jesus devoured death! Its ending, he began.

Thanks be to God who gives us, and who gives Job, this victory.

Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> In 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians, Paul wrote: “Brothers and sisters, we want you to know about people who have died so that you won’t mourn like others who don’t have any hope. Since we believe that Jesus died and rose, so we also believe that God will bring with him those who have died in Jesus.” (4.13-14).