

Human Limitations

Job 38: 1-7, 34-41

Mark 10:35-45

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Job 38: 1-7, 34-41

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?

Can you lift up your voice to the clouds, so that a flood of waters may cover you? Can you send forth lightnings, so that they may go and say to you, ‘Here we are’? Who has put wisdom in the inward parts, or given understanding to the mind? Who has the wisdom to number the clouds? Or who can tilt the waterskins of the heavens, when the dust runs into a mass and the clods cling together? “Can you hunt the prey for the lion, or satisfy the appetite of the young lions, when they crouch in their dens, or lie in wait in their covert? Who provides for the raven its prey, when its young ones cry to God, and wander about for lack of food?

Mark 10:35-45

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?” And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” They replied, “We are able.” Then Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

“I think anything is possible if you have the mindset and the will and desire to do it and put the time in.”¹

“The fears are paper tigers. You can do anything you decide to do. You can act to change and control your life; and the procedure, the process is its own reward.”²

¹ Roger Clemens

² Amelia Earhart

“If you believe in yourself anything is possible.”³

“Be strong, be fearless, be beautiful. And believe that anything is possible when you have the right people there to support you.”⁴

“You can do anything as long as you have the passion, the drive, the focus, and the support.”⁵

“With hard work and dedication, anything is possible.”⁶

“With hard work and effort, you can achieve anything.”⁷

“To all the other dreamers out there, don't ever stop or let the world's negativity disenchant you or your spirit. If you surround yourself with love and the right people, anything is possible.”⁸

As these quotes tell us, anything, everything is possible. We can do anything we can think of doing. The sky is the limit, but then again, space travel has shown us that even the sky itself is not a limit. There are limitless inspirational quotes, self-help books, and rousing coaches to assure us that absolutely nothing is out of our reach. We are only as limited as our imagination and desire will hold us back.

There are certainly times when those messages—whether from ourselves, loved ones or the media—are the motivation we need to face a challenge, to strive for a goal, to achieve a dream. They can carry us through the rough hurdles, the painful passages, the moments deprived of energy, the dark nights of the soul.

Yet they also create the very thing that they seek to prevent, to undermine, to stop, and that is that we do—and we should have--- our limits. We are not meant to do it all, and to do it all with perfection. When we do not succeed at constant excellence and superior achievements, we are human, we are not failures.

The 2020/2021 Summer Olympics most recently reminded us of that truth. 24-year-old Simone Biles has earned 32 Olympic and World Championship medals, and is tied with just one other woman as the most decorated gymnast of all time. On Day 1 of the trials, she dominated during by placing first in three of the four exercises. On Day 2, despite suffering numerous mishaps, she still qualified for the all-around final, in first place. She was the only athlete to qualify for all the individual finals.

Following her qualifications performance, when anyone would have expected her to be elated, jubilant and confident, Biles stated that she was “[feeling] the weight of the world on [her] shoulders” and that she felt affected by the pressure of the Olympics.”

She had everything, and even more was coming. Yet she recognized her pain and accepted her limits.

“I say put mental health first. Because if you don't, then you're not going to enjoy your sport and you're not going to succeed as much as you want to. So it's OK sometimes to even sit out the big competitions to focus on yourself, because it shows how strong of a competitor and person that you really are — rather than just battle through it.”

She withdrew from the rest of the team competitions, citing mental health issues, and then later from the finals of the individual all-around competition, with the exception of the

³ Miley Cyrus

⁴ Misty Copeland

⁵ Sabrina Bryan

⁶ Timothy Weah

⁷ Antoine Griezmann

⁸ Adam Green

balance beam final, although her routine was scaled back. She won the bronze medal and called it her most meaningful one, as she felt it symbolized her focus on mental health and her perseverance.

Some commentators--particularly among conservative media-- and some Olympic fans, criticized Biles, accusing her of being a "quitter." She was also slandered with racist, sexist, and even transphobic comments. Multiple gymnasts, however, defended her decision and actions as they relayed their own stories of struggle. Biles' decision to prioritize her mental health was generally widely praised and credited with starting a wider conversation about the role of mental health in sports.

Being able to recognize, accept, respect and give voice to her own human limits opened doors that had been locked tight, locked tight not only for Olympic athletes, but all who struggle and suffer under the shadows and limits of mental health issues.

Being human naturally means we have limitations, yet being human makes us want to reject limitations, to instead feel competent, confident, independent, strong, capable and invincible. We delude ourselves with platitudes, forgetting and denying that our limitations are actually what help to unite us, to bring us together in community, in need of one another, and most importantly, to recognize and embrace our dependence upon God. It is a lesson we need to keep on learning over and over.

Even those who ministered with Jesus needed to learn this lesson a few times over. James and John had heard enough, seen enough, misinterpreted enough, from their time with Jesus to anticipate a triumphant royal scene when he arrived in Jerusalem, and they wanted to be at the center of his success, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in *your* glory." Their own human limitations prevented them from hearing the message that Jesus did teach of his future suffering, death and resurrection, stopped them from hearing just what was at stake. Once again, Jesus defined what it means to be first and great, but the sons of Zebedee appeared to have misunderstood everything Jesus had said and done. They were limited in their understanding of the cup that Jesus would drink, and the baptism he would endure—the violence and the death that awaited him. In their quest to ride the shirttails of Jesus' glory, they completely missed that the power they sought would be the power that led to Jesus' death, a political spectacle that led to his glory by dying despised and powerless.

"You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

Jesus invited them to redefine their understanding of power, prestige, status, and leadership as serving the needs of another. The glory they seek comes not from individual accomplishment but from serving, not from supremacy but from service. That is what is possible when you have the mindset and the will and desire to do it.

While James and John sought glory *after* Jesus' ministry, Job's yearning for answers and insight into the unknowable mind of God, brought God's questions to him from the time *before* time. In a whirlwind tour through the creation and architecture of the cosmos, God showed Job, shows us, a world not centered on humans, a world that is not predictable nor safe, but beautiful and good. God's many questions seem to be a pretty straightforward way of showing, according to biblical scholar Carol Newsom in *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations*⁹, that

⁹ (Newsom, 2003)

“God is God, and Job is not.” God’s conversation is with Job, God’s conversation is with all of us who ask questions beyond our human ability to understand. The Lord’s answers avoid Job’s personal, heartfelt questions as they emphasize our human limitations. But at the heart of this passage lies what is the only possible answer to any of our human limitations—that it is God who is God; God who created the earth, who orders the heavens, who sustains life in their midst, and who, even when it is difficult for us to see or feel, we can trust is there with us and for us. And that is enough. Amen.