

Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?

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Job 38:1-5 (and other selected verses) — 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 answer 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! ... Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place? ... Have the gates of death been revealed to you? ... Where is the way to the dwelling of light, and where is the place of darkness? ... Surely you know, for you were born then, and the number of your days is great! ... Can you lift up your voice to the clouds, so that a flood of waters may cover you? Can you send forth bolts of lightning, so that they come and say to you, “Here we are”? ... Who provides food for the raven, when its young ones cry out to God, and wander about for lack of nourishment?

Many scholars think that this is one of the oldest books in the Bible. At the very least, the book’s setting is one of the oldest: it’s set before the time of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—the patriarchs whose story is told in Genesis, and whose descendants become the Israelites. It’s fitting that Job is so old, because the book is about one of the oldest questions in our faith, and in all faiths. The question goes something like this: If God is all-powerful (or at least powerful enough to create and to sustain this world), and if God is good, then shouldn’t the world be good too? Or, at the very least, shouldn’t the world be just? That is, when people do good things, shouldn’t they get rewarded, and when people do bad things, shouldn’t they get punished? If God is just, why are so many good people suffering so greatly, and why does evil seem to win the day so often? If God is as amazing as people say God is, then why does God’s world look like it’s going to hell in one big hand-basket? Questions like these are as old as religion—and as fresh as today’s news.

The story of Job isn’t really about *answering* these questions—at least not in any sort of final, comprehensive way; rather, the story is about *wrestling* with them. The wrestling comes in the form of a heated dialogue, 35 chapters long, between an upstanding, wealthy man named Job and four others. But before we get to that, we need to go over the set-up for this dialogue.

The book of Job opens with an imagined interaction between God and a less powerful divine being who is opposed to God. In the Hebrew text, this being is called a *sataan*, which means something like adversary, and which is the root of the English word “satan.” So, in chapter 1, God directs this adversary’s attention to Job, essentially saying, “Look how wonderful this man is! He is perfectly virtuous, perfectly faithful to me.” The adversary responds, “Well, *of course* he is! And you wanna know why, God? Because you made him rich! You gave him land and animals and servants and a big family and more possessions than he knows what to do with! You’ve made him as comfortable as he could possibly be—*of course* he is faithful to you. But take away all those pretty little things you gave him, and Job will curse you to your face.”

God says, “Okay. You have permission to take away those pretty little things. But you may not touch his body.” So, the adversary leaves this interaction with God to go and reap destruction in Job’s life. First, thieves come and steal the hundreds of oxen and donkeys that he owns. Then, fire falls down from the sky and burns up his thousands of sheep, as well as his servants. Then, a great wind strikes the house where all of Job’s children are gathered, and the house caves in, and all of them die. In the story, Job learns about all of these catastrophes, one after the other, within the span of about a minute. He falls to the ground. He weeps uncontrollably. But he does not curse God.

Then the scene shifts back to the heavens. God points out Job’s continued faithfulness, but the adversary won’t admit defeat just yet: “At the end of the day,” the adversary says, “all people *really* care about is their own skin. Remove your hedge of protection from Job’s body, and *then* he will curse you to your face.” Again, God says, “Okay. You have permission to harm him, but you may not take his life.” The adversary covers Job, from head to toe, with sores and boils that eat away at his flesh. The story tells us, in chapter 2, that he is sitting naked on a pile of ashes, scraping his disfigured body with a shard of pottery. And still, he does not curse God. And still, he remains faithful. And yet, he is crushed. Job doesn’t just wish that he was dead; he wishes that he had never been born.

That’s when three of Job’s friends show up. Later, they are joined by a fourth onlooker, and together these four make up Job’s dialogue partners for the next 35 chapters—the majority of the book. The dialogue centers around explaining Job’s suffering and trying to reconcile it with their shared belief that God is powerful, good, and just. Stubbornly, the four men cling to the old mantra: good things happen to good people, and bad things happen to bad people. So, if bad things are happening to you, Job, then you must have done some bad things that God is punishing you for. But Job knows in his heart that this is not true, that he has been faithful, and so this explanation gets them nowhere.

Then the fourth onlooker throws out the possibility that God is using all of this suffering to strengthen Job’s character, to teach him some important life lessons: “God delivers the afflicted by their afflictions,” the man says, “and opens their ears by adversity.” This explanation may have the potential to get them *somewhere*—but only so far. See, it’s one thing to speculate that God brought some failure or misfortune into your life in order to help you grow and eventually succeed; it’s another thing to say that God killed all your family and is torturing your body in order to make you “a better person.” Love can be tough; but love can’t be cruel.

So, after 35 chapters, the dialogue hasn’t really gotten them anywhere. Job has exposed the insufficiencies of his friends’ explanations, leaving him to assume that God has indeed tortured him, then abandoned him—and not just him, but people all over: Job laments, “the dying groan, and the throats of the wounded cry for help; yet God pays no attention to their prayer.” Several times, he essentially says, “I wish I could see God in court! I wish I could force God to show up and give an account for all of this!”

Which brings us, at last, to our second reading. In chapters 38 through 41, God shows up—not to give Job an explanation for his suffering, or for *anyone's* suffering, but to give Job a dizzying array of rhetorical questions: Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Have you commanded the morning since your days began? Where is the way to the dwelling of light? Surely, you know! It seems that God is trying to renew Job's sense of awe in the mysteries of the universe, and declaring that God is lord over all these mysteries, and reminding Job that he—in his smallness, his finitude—simply *cannot* comprehend the ways of an infinite God, the God who created the entire cosmos—not just the earth, but light and darkness, life and death, all manner of enormous and mysterious things. And yet, the last verse of chapter 38 tells us, this same God also provides food for the tiny baby ravens, crying out with their little baby screeches for nourishment.

There's just one more chapter in the book of Job after God's 4-chapter-long speech, and in it we read that Job is blessed with twice as much as he had before—new land, new animals, new possessions, new family. So, it's kind of sort of a happy ending, but the tragedies in Job's life are not undone, and those 35 chapters of dialogue are never really resolved. The age-old questions of *why*—why suffering, why evil, why so many bad things to so many good people—those questions are still around. And so is God, the lord of all mysteries. And so are the baby ravens, still being fed.

Friends, in the midst of suffering, in the midst of uncertainty, in the midst of darkness and even death, may the Spirit help us to accept the mystery, help us to choose awe and gratitude even as we sigh and mourn, help us to trust in the words of Jesus from Matthew 10: “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So, do not be afraid. You are worth more to God than many sparrows.” Amen.