

Job and the God of Creation

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

3rd in a five-part series

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Job 4:1-2, 7-8; 38:1-4; 40:1-2 (New Living Translation)

[The Accuser, a member of the divine council, has come to God accusing Job of being faithful to God only because of the many blessings in his life. So God and the Accuser make a bet as to whether Job's heart is true to God or not. In disaster after disaster, everything Job has is taken away from him. After Job has lost everything his friends come to sit with him in silence for seven days. Then they make the mistake of opening their mouths.]

Then Eliphaz the Temanite replied to Job:

²“Will you be patient and let me say a word? For who could keep from speaking out?

⁷“Stop and think! Does the innocent person perish? When has the upright person been destroyed? ⁸My experience shows that those who plant trouble and cultivate evil will harvest the same.”

[After long discussions of all the possible reasons for Job's suffering which center on figuring out what Job or his family did to bring these curses on, God arrives with a word of his own.]

Then the LORD answered Job from the whirlwind:

²“Who is this that questions my wisdom with such ignorant words? ³Brace yourself, because I have some questions for you, and you must answer them.

⁴“Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you know so much.”

Then the LORD said to Job, ²“Do you still want to argue with the Almighty? You are God's critic, but do you have the answers?”

This week, we turn to a man whose world has fallen in on him.

Natural disasters, illness, death. “Why?” is the question on everyone's lips.

The “once upon a time” story of Job is simple. He lives in the land of Uz and is, by all accounts, a “blameless and upright” man, wealthy and devoted to God. Meanwhile, in the heavens, a member of God's divine council is charged with roaming the earth as a sort of prosecutor. Coming before God, the Accuser (*ha-satan* in the Hebrew) claims that Job is devoted to God only because he has been very blessed in his life and that if Job loses everything, then he will turn against God.

So God and the accuser make a bet. God allows the Accuser to take everything from Job – his family, his home, his wealth, even his health. Then, they will find out whether Job is truly faithful to God or not.

The disasters that fall on Job are numerous and varied. Some of the suffering he endures is caused by marauders. But much of Job's suffering results from what we would call natural disasters; lightning, a wind storm, disease. Job loses everything as his family is killed in the disasters and raids and all of Job's property is destroyed.

Job has no idea why such suffering has fallen on him. Job's friends come to comfort him and for seven days they simply sit with him. That is very wise of them. But as the days go by, they can't resist trying to answer the questions posed by Job's suffering. Surely, Job has done something wrong. Or perhaps his family did. Somebody must have, they say . . . for bad things don't happen to good people.

But, of course, you and I know that they do. Bad things happen to good people all the time. Sometimes it is at the hands of other people, but sometimes it is the indiscriminate suffering caused by a tsunami or a tornado or an illness. Good people,

though marred by sin, die prematurely all the time. And, sometimes, the most awful, miserable, hateful people live to a ripe old age.

In the end, after Job's friends have demonstrated their foolishness and pride through all their futile and incorrect explanations, God arrives and puts human wisdom in perspective.

The gist of what God has to say is this: this is God's world and Job's friends are foolish to think they can answer all the questions. They do not have the answers and they won't ever get them. In essence, Job, his friends, and all of us are finite and limited in our perspective, our knowledge, our understanding, and our power. God is not.

“Are the bad things that happen to us punishment for sin?”

In the ancient world and for many people still, the bad things that happen to us are *necessarily* the result of something we've done, some sin we've committed. Certainly, this is how many of the Israelites understood the world to be. For most Jews, the prosperous were blessed by God and those who struggled or were struck by tragedy were reaping the consequences of their sin. In some Jewish communities, those who were lame could not be leaders for these very reasons.

But the book of Job is like a blaring trumpet reminding us that things are not that simple. Yes, sin has consequences, often tragic consequences. We are created to live in one manner but often choose to live in another. We can't be surprised that life often takes bad turns as a result of our own bad choices.

BUT . . . we cannot reverse the equation. Though sin leads to bad consequences, we can't conclude that suffering *necessarily* results from sin. Job suffered but he had not sinned. This is one of the main points of the book. Job doesn't know why he has suffered but he knows that he didn't bring it on himself.

SO . . . there is truth in the statement:
If you sin, then you will suffer.

But Job's friends reversed the statement:
If you suffer, then you have sinned.

The reversal is an error in reasoning and the book of Job is a critical corrective against it.

But “Why??”

Still, no matter how much we might try to shove the question to the side, it keeps coming back to us. Why so much suffering in these disasters? Why couldn't God have made a world without such pain?

In the first two studies in this series, we saw that the Bible paints a picture of a creation that, though good, is not static and unchanging. Instead, creation is dynamic, evolving, untamed, and even hostile. God made the world, but the humans are to “subdue” it. Further, we considered the portrait of God in the story of the flood, a God deeply involved in and connected to his creation. Far from remote, God commits to a self-limiting promise. These stories prepare us to consider the “why” differently than before.

John Polkinghorne has long held the mantle of world's leading physicist/priest, excelling and renowned in both. Here's a bit of what he has to say about the nature of this world's design:

We tend to believe that if we had been in charge of creation we would have done it better. With a little more care about the details, we would have kept the beauty of sunset, but eliminated germs like staph. The more we understand the processes of the world, however, the less likely does it seem that this would be possible. The created order looks like a package deal. Exactly the same biochemical processes that enable cells to mutate, making evolution possible, are those that enable cells to become

cancerous and generate tumors. You can't have one without the other. In other words the possibility of disease is not gratuitous; it's the necessary cost of life.¹

Polkinghorne's point seems pretty self-evident to me when I stop to think about it. I like the fact that gravity holds my feet to the ground. I don't like that the same gravity can make a boulder fall on my head. Indeed, this "package deal" called creation is very finely tuned, so much so that it suggests a designer. Robin Collins lists a few examples of the fine-tuning in our universe:

1. If the Big Bang had differed in its strength by as much as one part in 10^{60} , the universe would have either collapsed back in on itself or would have expanded too quickly to allow the formation of galaxies and solar systems. In either case, life would be impossible.
2. If the strong nuclear force in an atom had been off by as little as 5%, life would be impossible.
3. The electromagnetic force is 10^{38} times stronger than gravity. If the ratio had been 10^{32} , rather than 10^{38} , stars would be a billion times less massive and would burn a million times faster. Obviously, life as we know it would be impossible.

Could God have done a better job at designing the cosmos? It seems silly to suggest that God would design a "sub-optimal" cosmos. I suspect that in our finiteness, we can't really understand all of the "design criteria." After all, God is love. What does the primacy of love really mean for the design of the material cosmos? What sort of world is really "best" for those whom God loves? A world in which there is no risk, no challenge, no growth, no change, nothing to overcome? Is that a world you'd wish for those you love?

In *Creation Untamed*, Terence Fretheim offers us these reflections on the questions for God in the Job story:²

[The] world that God describes in these speeches represents God's willed design, and Job should trust that God knows what God is doing in creating such a world. At the same time, God does not ignore Job's questions about such a world. God could have dismissed Job's queries outright and shut down conversation in a hurry. Yet God chooses to respond at some length to the issues Job raises and gives Job room to respond, thereby demonstrating that the "why?" questions are worthy of consideration and, at least to some extent, can help human beings understand some reasons for suffering, reasons not necessarily related to sin. God may be said to have created a good world, but that world is not harmless. Job and we ourselves might wish God had created a different kind of world, but we will never know whether such a world would have been less dangerous.

The divine relationship to this kind of world is such that God no longer acts with complete freedom but from within a committed relationship to the structures of creation to which God will be faithful. . . . The speeches reveal that God's well-ordered world does not have a tight causal weave (it is more like burlap than silk); there is room for ambiguity and randomness that may occasion suffering. To be told that God is responsible for creating the kind of world in which suffering can take place may provide a remarkable comfort. There is a price, sometimes a horrendous price, the people may pay for living in such a world. But this is a price that God also pays, for God too will experience the suffering that the creatures undergo. God does not remain aloof, ensconced in some distant abode. God is not like a mechanic fixing a car. God enters deeply into our suffering; rather than controlling things from without, God works from within.

¹From an NPR interview with John Polkinghorne in 2008 by Krista Tippit, "Quarks and Creation." It is quoted in Fretheim's, *Creation Untamed*.

²Terence Fretheim, *Creation Untamed*, 2010. P. 88-89.

Memorizing Scripture Verses – a review

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

(John 15:12-13 NRSV)

On the eve of his crucifixion, Jesus tried to help his disciples see the path ahead and that this path, as difficult as it would be, was the path of true love and faithfulness.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith; to the Jew first and also the Greek.

(Romans 1:16 NRSV)

Paul knew that the story he told seemed crazy to most who heard it. A crucified God? A resurrected man? Absurd. . . . But Paul knew it was the truth and he told it to all who would listen. He urged them to embrace this story and this man, Jesus.

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.”

(Luke 9:23-24 NRSV)

Here, Jesus is preparing his disciples for what lies ahead. They are to put Christ first, irrespective of the inevitable cost. This is Jesus’ challenge to us also. The ever-present question for comfortable, affluent Christians is this: What is the cost to me of following Jesus? If our answer is “none,” then we have yet to grasp the nature of discipleship.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. You might begin by talking about Job. He has suffered terribly, losing everything – all for no apparent reason. Assume that you are one of Job’s friends. You’ve come to comfort him and the conversation inevitably turns to the explanation for Job’s sufferings. What possible explanations might you suggest? What explanations might you hear from others? What is your reaction to God’s pronouncements that the answers are unknowable and that it is foolish for us even to ask?
2. What do you think is God’s role in the world’s evil and suffering? Share some things you’ve heard people say about God when confronted by tragedy, such as “this is all part of God’s plan.” How do these statements make you feel about God?
3. Setting aside the effects of human sinfulness, there is still much about this world that we’d like to change, or so we think. No tornadoes, no earthquakes . . . a pretty long list. But just take it for granted that this planet is put together in the best way so as to accomplish God’s purposes. Are there any reasons why these might be part of God’s good but not perfect creation. What do storms and quakes and floods contribute to us or to God, if anything at all?
4. How can God be all-powerful and all-loving and yet there be such pain in this world? Could it be that he is not as powerful as we think, as some people suggest? Or might God not be as loving as we think, as others suggest? How do we hold together our proclamation that God truly is good, that he is all-powerful and all-loving? What would you say to those who reply that given the world’s suffering, this is so much sentimental nonsense?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, Job 1 and 2 – the wager is made	Tuesday, Job 4 – Eliphaz believes the innocent do not suffer
Wednesday, Job 8 – Bildad believes that the innocent will prosper and the guilty will suffer	Thursday, Job 27 – Job affirms his innocence
Friday, Job 38, 40:1-14, & 42 – God speaks, Job repents and is restored	Weekly Joys and Concerns

