

## Job: When Bad Things Happen

Job 1 & 2

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Dean Feldmeyer

The book of Job is one of those books that is full of mystery. No one is sure when or where it was written. Still, it is considered one of the great works of literature of all time and is studied, as such, in college world literature classes.

That it is a work of fiction is axiomatic. Biblical scholars as far back as Saint Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas have considered it such and modern scholarship takes it for granted. But it is not JUST fiction. It is theological fiction. It is fiction that deals with deep and profound theological issues. We'll come to those in a few minutes.

Most scholars today believe that Job's story originated in Babylonian mythology and was adapted by the Jews for their own purposes during the Babylonian Captivity (586 – 535 BCE). As evidence for this they point to the fact that Job is an Uzite, from the Aramean city of Uz. His friends – Elephaz, Bildad and Zophar are all from non-Israelite locales and have Babylonian or Chaldean names.

The book also contains at least two different structures, which is often taken as evidence of redaction or the merging of several traditions. The two opening chapters are exposition, setting the stage, and they are told in prose. Chapters 3 – 31 contain a series of dialogues between Job and his friends, long speeches that are written in verse. In Chapter 32 a fifth person is introduced, a youth named Elihu, who speaks to Job and Job's friends for five chapters from a different, more youthful perspective and these, too, are in verse. (Many scholars believe that the Elihu section was not part of the original story and was added later as Elihu is not mentioned anywhere else in the story and his speeches tend to cover ground that has already been covered by the other friends.)

In Chapter 38 God breaks his long silence and finally speaks to Job, though it would be a mistake to say that he "answers" Job. There is a brief dialogue between God and Job, all in verse, and then, in the final chapter (42) we return to prose for the epilogue.

Job has been described as an epic poem, a narrative poem, a short story, and a novella. I like the idea put forth by some that it is, in fact, the libretto to an early, Babylonian opera. There is much to commend this theory. The book of Job is filled with high melodrama, long arias, overwrought emotional dialogue, and it concludes with lightning, thunder and earthquakes, what, in early theater, was called *deus ex machina* – god from machines. But I believe those scholars are most accurate, however, who describe it as either a "parlor drama," that is, a play that was written to be read rather than performed.

The theological questions that it asks and the answers that it offers are much too complex to be pondered as they are delivered aloud from a stage. These are issues that must be read and reread, pondered, stewed over, discussed and revisited. These are issues that must be taken up by people of faith from time to time and reexamined in the light of new knowledge and experience.

And it is to that exact task that we will commend ourselves, albeit briefly, this morning.

### WHEN NOT WHY

On February 1, 1983, Rabbi Harold Kushner, then the Rabbi of the Temple Israel in Natick, Massachusetts, published a little, 160 page book called *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. I read it and found it to be a beautiful, thoughtful, compassionate examination of the problem of suffering for people of faith. It was, I believed, and still believe, today, a book that may not answer all questions on the subject of suffering but should certainly be included in the library of anyone who hopes to explore that topic in a serious way.

Of course, everyone does not agree with me on this. There are those among our conservative Christian brothers and sisters who believe it to be impious, erroneous, theologically incorrect and even "dangerous." One of the things that I've noticed about those who have not liked this little book is that they almost always misname it. The title of the book is *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, and they almost always refer to it as "Why Bad Things Happen to Good People."

Rabbi Kushner makes it very clear, in the book, that he doesn't know why bad things happen to good people. He certainly rejects some explanations that were offered to him when his little son was dying, explanations that were offered by well-intentioned people but hurt, nevertheless, explanations that were theologically untenable, or morally repugnant. But he also makes it very clear that the point of his book is NOT to explain why bad things happen. He simply accepts, as we all must, that they do. His purpose is to offer some ways that good people, people of faith and morals, might want to include in the spiritual armor which they may someday have to put on in the face of suffering.

But, still, people criticize the book for not explaining unjust suffering, usually by those who think they have the explanation all worked out.

The Book of Job often comes under that same criticism.

It is a book that deals seriously with the issue of suffering, but it is not the intention of this book to explain suffering, unjust or otherwise.

In fact, what this book does is ask some very serious questions about suffering and other topics, and offer some very serious answers, answers that come from popular wisdom and culture, personal experience, logic and reason, and old tradition. It challenges those answers and points out their weaknesses but never really offers satisfactory alternatives.

If we come to the Book of Job expecting to have suffering explained and to have our own pain salved, we will be disappointed. For this is a book which asks not why bad things happen, but rather, "When bad things happen, to whom will we turn, and how will we respond?"

## THE STORY OF JOB

The story of Job is simplicity itself.

"There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job, and that man was blameless, upright, fearing God and turning away from evil." Thus begins the story. Job we learn in the ensuing verses is not just a good and pious man, he is also a wealthy and successful man, a happy man with much to be happy about.

He has lots of children who are, themselves, successful and happy. He owns more than any human at that time could expect to own in a lifetime. And he is a good man, conscious of his place in the universe and his relationship to the God who created it.

Once Job's goodness and station in life are established, the scene shifts to heaven and the heavenly court where God hears cases of justice and injustice in the world. The heavenly prosecuting attorney, the Accuser, is there.

Some translations refer to him as "Satan" or "the Satan." At this point in Israelite theology, the word "Satan" was not a proper noun or a name. It was a title. The word "the" always preceded it. The Satan is simply the angel whose role it is to serve as the prosecuting attorney, the one who brings charges against people in the heavenly court.

The Satan is there in court and God asks him where he's been. "Oh, walking around on the earth," he says.

God asks, "Did you notice Job? How blameless he is? You couldn't find anything against him if your life depended on it, could you?"

The Satan answers, "Well, of course not. But why shouldn't he be good? You've given him everything he could ask for. The only reason he's good is because he's afraid he'll lose it all if he isn't. You take away all that stuff he has and he'll curse your name. I know these humans. They're all alike."

God says, "No. Job is a righteous man by nature. He knows that I love him and he won't curse my name no matter what happens."

"Wanna bet?"

"You're on," God says. "Go ahead. Take away everything he has, only don't touch him personally. You'll see."

So the Satan does as God has allowed. He takes it all: the cattle, the horses, the sheep, the children, the money. Everything. All dead or gone. It's a horrendous account full of pain and despair. And, yet, Job doesn't curse God. He grieves, yes, and his wife says that he ought to curse God but he doesn't.

The scene shifts back to the heavenly court again.

God talking to the Satan: "See, I told you. He is a righteous man by nature. All that terrible stuff you did to him and he still doesn't curse me."

The Satan replies: "Well, yeah, but that's because he's not, personally, in pain. You take away his health and you'll see. He'll curse you to your face."

God says, "Okay, but don't kill him."

So the Satan afflicts Job with boils – painful, oozing sores, all over his body. His hair falls out. His eyes swell nearly shut. He is in constant, terrible pain. So bad is it that he collapses on a dung heap, the only place where there is warmth – dried dung was used to fuel fires – and tries, as best he can to tend to his sores with a broken piece of glass.

His wife tells him that their lives aren't worth living. Just curse God and die and get it over with. But Job refuses.

Now, please don't confuse this fictional account of fictional events with a philosophical or theological explanation of how God operates, how God treats God's creation. It's a story and, remember, it's not about why innocents suffer; it's about how innocents suffer, especially innocents who are people of faith. Everyone who reads this story can nod their heads knowingly at the metaphorical nature of Job's suffering. We have all known good people, pious people, innocent people who have suffered terribly. Job is, as the author intends him to be, one of us. So let's not put the onus of explanation upon this story. Let's let it be what it is: a story that raises and explores some profound theological questions without, necessarily, answering them.

Now, once again the scene shifts.

Three of Job's friends, from different cities, all hear about Job's suffering and they get on their camels, meet up, and ride to be with him. And I want you to hear the account of their arrival one more time, because I think, it is one of the most beautiful passages in the whole Bible.

It is, for me, the description of true friendship. Earlier I read from the New Revised Standard Version. Here is how Eugene Peterson has written it in his Bible paraphrase, *The Message*:

"Three of Job's friends heard of all the trouble that had fallen on him. Each traveled from his own country – Eliphaz from Teman, Bildad from Shuhah, Zophar from Naamath – and went together to Job to keep him company and comfort him. When they first caught sight of him, they couldn't believe what they saw – they hardly recognized him! They cried out in lament, ripped their robes, and dumped dirt on their heads a sign of their grief. Then they sat with him on the

ground. Seven days and nights they sat there without saying a word. They could see how rotten he felt, how deeply he was suffering.”

What great friends are these, huh? They come not with platitudes or clichés but with empathy and sympathy. They bring only themselves and offer only their presence and know that these are the best and most helpful gifts they can give. To sit by his side and share his pain for seven days and seven nights and say nothing. What tremendous discipline and what tremendous friendship.

We would never want to say, at this point, that Job is a lucky man. Certainly, his experience would contradict that notion. But he must certainly be a good man to have friends such as these.

So, for seven days and seven nights they sit there and say nothing. Maybe they cry with him. Maybe they moan with him. Maybe they hold his hand or lay their hands on his shoulders or embrace him, take him in their arms. **But they say nothing.**

What could they say? What words are there? What magic phrase is there that could reduce Job’s suffering by even a gram? There are no words. There is no phrase. There is only the presence of those who love us and are willing to share our grief, our misery, our despair and, by sharing it, lighten the load just a little.

So they sit with him...for seven days...and seven nights...and they say...nothing.  
And then, on the morning of the eighth day, Job breaks his silence.

### THE ISSUES OF JOB

In Chapter 3 Job begins to speak and his speech is a rant, a lament, a pouring out of his soul. Life, he says, is a curse. There is no point. He would, he insists, have been better off not being born than to have been born only to bear this terrible pain and loss.

And thus begins a series of speeches by Job and his three friends and, later, a fourth. These speeches range over a great deal of territory. They weave philosophical and theological arguments, they argue, debate, prove and disprove, insist, defer and, eventually, end without ever really solving anything. But they do provide a platform for raising and discussing issues that every human being, at one time or another, is compelled to think about.

I am grateful to Gerald Janzen of the Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis and Carol A. Newsom of the Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta for the scholarship they have provided toward our understanding of this marvelous book and I now offer you a couple of their insights.

Janzen offers that the book of Job raises four kinds of questions:

1. **Requests for information.** Job’s friends ask him to think back over his life and take an inventory. Have you done anything, they want to know, that may have brought this all down upon yourself?
2. **Rhetorical questions.** Questions to which the answers are already known by all of the parties but are asked in order to make a rhetorical or logical point.
3. **Impossible questions.** These are questions to which there are no satisfactory answers. They are asked to illustrate the limits of human knowing. “How high is up?” “What color is sadness?” “How tall is God?”
4. **Existential questions.** Questions which have to do with the human condition and may or may not have satisfactory answers. These are questions of meaning, the asking of which help us to grow and improve as human beings.

Newsom lists five different topics or issues that the book of Job serves up in the crucible of these questions:

1. **Why be pious?** Why does Job, and by extension any person, revere God? Is it an implicit bargain for security and well-being, or is our relationship with God independent of circumstances. Do we revere God because we’re afraid not to? Or because we truly love God beyond what may or may not happen to us as we go through life?
2. **How to suffer?** The real issue of Job is not, as we have said, *why* people suffer. Job simply takes it for granted that we do. The real issue of this book is the question of the proper conduct of a person in suffering, and that is to turn to God in humility, trust, and prayer. On the other hand, Job refuses to engage in introspection and moral self-examination. He seems to be of the opinion that God has no right to cause, or at the very least allow, innocent people to suffer and when it happens God owes us an explanation.
3. **What is the meaning of suffering?** We may not always know the reason for it but the book of Job suggests that we can, by our own attitude and conduct, give meaning to our suffering. And it offers some suggestions:
  - A. For the wicked, it is judgment;
  - B. For the ethically stunted, it is a warning;
  - C. For the morally immature, it is an educational discipline;
  - D. For the righteous, it is something to be borne with the confidence that God will always, eventually make things right.
4. **The character of God and how God runs things.** The entire book of Job calls us to examine what our assumptions are about the very nature of God’s character. Is God good? Just? Sympathetic? Trustworthy? If we believe that God is these things, why do we believe them? How does that affect the other things we say

and believe about God? Job and his friends hold in common that belief that, no matter what we see or experience, God will ultimately be revealed as a God of justice and compassion.

5. **How do we know things, especially things about God?** Job's friends tend to operate out of the "everybody knows" or "popular wisdom" mode of knowing. If everybody believes it, it must be true. But they also base their arguments on common sense, logic, anecdotal evidence, private revelation, and old traditions. Job, on the other hand, rejects all of these when they contradict his personal experience. So what is the most trustworthy way of knowing? Upon what do we base our faith?

In the end of the story, God taps into this vein of thought. If Job insists upon basing his understanding and his knowing on his own, personal experience, then God gives him an experience that challenges what Job thought he knew and gives him a new perspective. Unlike Elijah, who heard God in the still, small voice, Job hears God's voice in the whirlwind – the tornado. Job comes to know God not through arguments or logic but through a radical encounter, an encounter that, at once, affirms and questions all that has been said by all of the people in the story.

God is just, but God is also inscrutable. God is loving, but God is also mysterious. God is with us in intimate relationship, but God is also radically other. God is the source of all creative power, but God is also that power which destroys in order to make room for new creation.

God is that power which calls us to seek knowledge, but limits our knowing.

God is that power which calls us into intimate, loving relationships with others, but limits our capacity for love.

God is that power which calls us to create and build, but limits our creative ability.

God is that power which calls us to embrace truth, but hides truth in complexity.

God is that power which calls us to himself, but shrouds his presence in parable and paradox.

And the book of Job reminds us that God is never confined to a single voice, a single revelation, or a single explanation. God is that reality in our lives that can only be expressed in a chorus of voices, a mixture of perspectives, and a multiplicity of experiences.

"Where **two or three** of you are gathered together," Jesus said.

It takes all of us ...to be the church.

**AMEN**

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