

Job 3rd Oct 2021

The reading today is from the book of Job. I don't know about you, but I find this book quite troubling. It leaves me with some very difficult questions about why God allowed Job to undergo such awful suffering and why God comes across as a cruel gambler, giving in to Satan. The strange conversation between Satan and God in the first few chapters often derails us from understanding the main ideas in the book. So I was very glad to find an excellent blog from the Bible project by Tim Mackie that really helped me to understand the book better and I am going to try and share what I think I have understood with you!

Tim cites a Hebrew scholar who helps us to understand the book of Job by exploring three claims made about God and Job, of which only two can be true at the same time.

1. God is Just and Good: God's character compels him to always act justly for the good of others
2. The Retribution Principle: God has ordered the world so that good deeds are rewarded, and evil deeds are punished
3. Job's Innocence: Job has done nothing to deserve his suffering

Clearly, Job's friends are firm believers in the retribution principle and that the righteous will prosper while the wicked will suffer. This was a commonly held belief at the time and maybe still is in some circles. But as they also believed that God is good and just, the conclusion was that Job must be guilty of some terrible secret sin for which he is being punished.

Job knew he had done nothing wrong, but he also believed that God operates according to the retribution principle which left him with the terrible possibility that God is therefore not good or just or maybe that God is just not very good at running the universe.

In chapter 31 verses 35-37 Job asks God for an explanation.

("Oh, that I had someone to hear me!

I sign now my defense—let the Almighty answer me;  
let my accuser put his indictment in writing.

**36**

Surely I would wear it on my shoulder,  
I would put it on like a crown.

**37**

I would give him an account of my every step;  
I would present it to him as to a ruler.)—

God offers two responses.

First He takes Job on a tour of the cosmos. He asks Job a series of impossible questions:

“Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?” (38:4). “Have you ever in your days commanded the morning light?” (38:12). “Where does light live, or where does darkness reside?” (38:19). “Can you lead out a constellation in its season?” (38:32).

Of course, Job will know full well he cannot know or do any of these things as a mere human. The point is, while Job is accusing God of having taken his eye off the ball, God helps him to see that his eye is in fact on every single detail of the operations of the universe. We will never be able to understand the Universe in the detail or have the perspective that God has.

God then says effectively, ok well then what about the bit of the earth that you inhabit? Have you ever provided food for lions, or seen an isolated mountain goat give birth? No? Well, perhaps Job understands the feeding patterns of wild donkeys that roam the hills, or ostriches and their strange ways of caring for their young. Maybe Job and God can have a stimulating conversation about Job’s knowledge of war horses, and the aerodynamics of an eagle soaring on thermal air currents. It must be becoming clear to Job that he doesn’t know quite as much as he thought he did about even the world he lives in as God does.

Job eventually answers:

“Behold, I am unworthy (Insignificant); what can I reply to You? I lay my hand on my mouth. Once I have spoken, and I will not answer; Even twice, and I will add nothing more.”

Whatever the reason is for Job’s suffering, God inattention is not one of them. What we think from our limited perspective is needless, tragic or unjust, may be completely different from a wider perspective. We do not have a big enough perspective to be able to accuse God of incompetence.

But God isn’t finished with Job. Job accuses him of being unjust so He invites Job to take over the running of the Universe for a day. Let Job have a go at enforcing the strict retribution principle he is so keen on. Unfortunately, he will find it to be a near-impossible job. The micromanagement required would be overwhelming, and then if successful it would probably result in the end of humankind. There would be no room for trial and error or growth and change.

When Job demands a full explanation, God asks Job to trust in his wisdom and character and Job responds with humility.

Maybe then, God **is** good and just and Job **is** innocent. Maybe it’s the assumption that all suffering is divine punishment and all abundance a reward that needs to be

challenged. The big question is Does God operate the universe according to the principle of retribution?

And the answer appears to be no. Sometimes bad things happen to good people and we cannot find any reason for it.

God's world is good, but it is not perfect. It is ordered and beautiful, but it is all sometimes wild and dangerous like the two beasts that God talks about in chapters 40 and 41. Why is there suffering in the world? God doesn't provide an answer. Except that we live in an amazing, complex world, that at the moment at least is not designed to prevent suffering. When we decided to become a Christian we weren't given some sort of immunity from suffering, that wasn't the deal at all. Maybe one day we will see how what hasn't killed us has made us stronger, maybe we won't. I can look back on times in my life that have been difficult and find many times that God, or the people of God have provided me support and comfort, but at the time it felt like God had abandoned me. And to be honest I got quite cross about it too and like Job complained bitterly to God about it.

What I found heartening in this book was that in an epilogue in chapter 42, we find out that Job's friends were wrong about him, but also that Job has spoken rightly about God. This is despite the fact that Job drew some hasty and incorrect conclusions about God. It seems that God approves of Job's wrestling with him and that Job approached him in honesty, and that the right way to process through issues like these is through the struggle of prayer.

So, the book doesn't unlock the puzzle of why bad things happen to good people. Rather, it invites us to trust God's wisdom when we encounter suffering rather than trying to figure out the "reasons" for it.

When suffering makes us search for reasons, we can be a bit like Job's friends and simplify God, or like Job and accuse God based on limited knowledge and evidence. Instead, God wants us to honestly bring our pain and suffering and trust that He cares and knows what he is doing.