

“I Would Lay My Case Before Him”

Job 23:1-9, 16-17

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Why do bad things happen to good people? What role does *God* play in human suffering? Is God involved when tragedies happen? Is God *at fault*? These are the questions we are wrestling with.

Job was not having a good day. Well, really, Job was not having a good *life*. His 500 yoke of oxen and 500 donkeys were stolen. His 7,000 sheep all died in a fire. His 3,000 camels were also stolen. Many of his servants were killed. His ten children all perished when a house collapsed on them. All of that happened in *a single day*. Then, loathsome sores broke out all over Job's body, from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. Job sits in his misery and sorrow, picking away at the scabs.

He had been a good man. A *very* good man. Blameless and upright, he had feared God; he had turned away from evil. When the tragedies happened, Job mourned, but he also got down on his knees to worship God. But when his body betrayed him, he no longer blessed the name of the Lord.

Job is having a crisis of faith. He is not sure that God is still worthy of worship. His wife is having an even deeper crisis; she thinks Job should just start cursing God, so that God would strike him dead.

They are giving up on God. They can not fathom why God would be doing this to them. In that respect, they are like many, *many* people today who wonder *where is God* when tragedies happen, and *why is there suffering*, especially among people who have been faithful to God. Job used to be able to say, “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.” Now he can no longer do that; his suffering and pain is too great. In his heart he is questioning the goodness of God.

Ever been there? Ever know somebody who's been there? Come on ... be honest.

What Job and his wife do *not* know is that there is another force at work. A malevolent, sinister force, bent on afflicting devastation and evil on God's good creation. The Bible calls that force “Satan.”

Job has three friends who hear about his suffering: Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. These men live in distant lands, but they care about Job a great deal, so they come to comfort and console him. “When they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him, and they raised their voices and wept aloud; they tore their robes and threw dust in the air upon their heads. They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great.”

Then, finally, Job speaks. All his agony and frustration comes pouring out. “Let the day perish in which I was born!” He curses the day of his birth. “Let that night be barren; let no joyful cry be heard in it.” He wishes he had never been born. “Why did I not die at birth, come forth from the womb and expire?” He wishes he were dead. Ever know anyone who has wished that? Come on ... be honest.

Eliphaz will have none of this. He tells Job how much he has helped other people, how much they have been blessed by him. He praises Job's good qualities. But, Eliphaz says, he has never heard of anyone who suffered, who hadn't done *something* wrong in God's eyes. "Can mortals be righteous before God?" he asks. He thinks the answer is *no*. No one can be *truly* righteous – not even Job. So God must be disciplining Job for some reason. Eliphaz encourages Job to accept God's discipline, "for he wounds, but he binds up; he strikes, but his hands heal." Eliphaz is telling Job to repent of his sin.

Job insists that he is innocent, and he prays that God would just kill him. "This would be my consolation," says Job, "for I have not denied the words of the Holy One." Job is wondering, *what's the point of being faithful, if it results in this?* Job says to Eliphaz, "I will not lie to your face." And to God, Job says, "What do I do to you, you watcher of humanity? Why have you made me your target?"

To this, Bildad replies: "How long will you say these things? ... Does God pervert justice? ... If you will seek God and make supplication to the Almighty, if you are pure and upright, surely then he will rouse himself for you and restore you to your rightful place.... God will not reject a blameless person."

Job says, "Indeed, I know that this is so!" Job know all about God's power, all about all God's mighty works of creation. Job says he "must appeal for mercy" to his accuser – but, Job says, "if I summoned him and he answered me, I do not believe that he would listen to my voice." God might be *powerful*, but Job no longer believes that God *cares*. Job says, "God destroys *both* the blameless and the wicked," and accuses God of "mocking the calamity of the innocent." There are questions he wants to ask God: "Let me know why you contend against me. Does it seem good to you to oppress, to despise the work of your hands and favor the schemes of the wicked? ... You know that I am not guilty! ... Why did you bring me forth from the womb? ... *Leave me alone*, that I may find a little comfort!"

Job's frank – and perhaps blasphemous – words make Zophar uncomfortable. "O that God would speak," he says, "and open his lips to you." Zophar believes that Job must be guilty of some *terrible* sin. Zophar says, "God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves." He begs Job: "direct your heart rightly" and tells Job to put his iniquity "far away," so that God would restore Job's health.

Job answers: "I desire to argue my case with God." Job knows that he is innocent, that he is not guilty of some great sin. Job says to his friends, "you whitewash with lies; all of you are worthless physicians." Their wisdom is worthless. They can't help Job with his deep theological questions.

There are times in our lives when we have big questions about God. Perhaps we might share those questions with our friends. The problem is that the answers they give will be only as good as the depth of their theological wisdom and insight. Sometimes their answers might be flimsy or even faulty.

The conversation has now become heated. Eliphaz accuses Job of "doing away with the fear of God," rejecting the teachings of the elders, thinking he is smarter than the rest of humanity, turning his spirit against God. "Listen to me," he says; it is the wicked who "writhe in pain all their days." It is those who "stretch out their hands against God" and "bid defiance to the Almighty" who suffer God's wrath.

Job says to Eliphaz that he has "heard many such things." He calls them "windy words." Those traditional understandings of God do not explain Job's suffering. Job accuses God of giving him up to the ungodly, casting him into the hands of the wicked, breaking him in two, seizing his neck and dashing him to pieces, setting him up as a target, slashing open his kidneys, and showing no mercy. Job insists: "there is no violence on my hands, and my prayer is pure." Job's spirit is broken – and he blames God.

Bildad says: “Why are we stupid in your sight?” He says it is the *wicked* whose light is put out.

Job replies: “How long will you torment me, and break me in pieces with words?” God, Job insists, has done this to him for *no good reason*. He says, “I call aloud, but there is no justice.” God has turned against him; his friends have turned against him; even children despise him and talk against him.

But Job still holds on to a slim hope: “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth, and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God.” Job believes that even after he dies, he will still – *in his flesh* – behold the face of God. Job seems to have a belief in the resurrection of the dead, the promise of hope that is given to all Christians, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Indeed, Job speaks of a “Redeemer,” who lives, and who will “at the last ... stand upon the earth.” Did Job have some glimpse of Jesus? That is how many Christians through the ages have read this passage. In the fourth century, the biblical commentator Jerome said, “No one since the days of Christ speaks so openly concerning the Resurrection as Job did before Christ.”

But his friends know nothing of that. Zophar, agitated, tells Job he is being rude. He says: “ever since mortals were placed on earth,” it is the wicked and godless people who are punished by God.

Job disagrees. “Why do the wicked live on, reach old age, and grow mighty in power? ... Their houses are safe from fear, and no rod of God is upon them.... They spend their days in prosperity.” Look around, says Job; can you not see that this is so? Who repays the wicked for what they have done?

Eliphaz thinks Job has lost his mind. “Is it for your *piety* that he reproves you? ... Is not your wickedness great? There is no end to your iniquities!” He accuses Job of exacting pledges from his family, taking clothes from the naked, giving the weary no water, with-holding bread from the hungry, sending widows away empty-handed, crushing the arms of orphans. Surely these must be Job’s crimes! Eliphaz pleads: “Agree with God, and be at peace; in this way good will come to you. Receive instruction ... and lay up his words in your heart. If you return to the Almighty, you will be restored.... You will pray to him, and he will hear you; light will shine on your ways.... He will deliver even those who are guilty.”

Job is tired of listening to his friends’ senseless prattle. He wishes he knew where to go to find God. “Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling! I would lay my case before him, and fill my mouth with arguments. I would learn what he would answer me, and understand what he would say to me.” But Job does *not* know where to go to find God. “If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him.” Job knows that he is blameless: “I have kept his way and have not turned aside. I have not departed from the commandment of his lips.” But God is nowhere to be found.

Most of us have, at one time or other, asked questions like the ones Job is asking. Most of us have, at one time or other, wondered where God is. Why do good people suffer such great misery? Why do bad people sometimes get away with *very* evil deeds? Why does God’s justice sometimes seem so incredibly lacking? Why does God himself sometimes feels very, *very* distant? These are some of the hardest questions humans ever ask, and some of the deepest questions explored anywhere in the Bible.

Those questions have answers. Those questions even have *good* answers. Too many Christians settle for the *cheap* answers. The Bible actually provides answers far richer than what many people think. To begin to find the *good* answers, you’ll either need to keep reading ... or come back next week.

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