

LIFE'S NOT FAIR

SERIES: SHATTERED: THE STORY OF JOB



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Job 4-31
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Job 4-31

There are still a handful of sayings that I remember my dad regularly repeating when I was younger. When it came to money: “A penny saved is a penny earned.” When we asked to be excused from the dinner table as soon as we finished eating: “But this is the best part of dinner, the part where we sit and chat.” And when my sister ate the last brownie before I got to it: “Life’s not fair.”

This last saying was repeated all the time in our house. “Life’s not fair.” When my friends got to go to the movies, but I had to stay home or when I had to go to bed before the 4th quarter of Monday night football. Basically, any time I had anything to complain about, out came the saying: “Life’s not fair.”

Whether or not this was also a mantra in your house growing up (or perhaps one you repeat to your own kids), we all become keenly aware at some point that life is not fair. When we first begin to learn this, it comes from a pretty narcissistic place. Life is not fair because so-and-so has something that I don’t. But, eventually, we gain some perspective and realize that there are also many people who have much less than we have, and this too is unfair.

Eventually, we get to the place where we cannot deny the fact that life is not just unfair (as in “unequal”); it is downright *unjust*. The poor are systematically oppressed by the rich and powerful. Men, women, and children are trapped in modern slavery all around the world—even here in the Bay Area. People are discriminated against because of their gender, their nationality, and the color of their skin. Even in the Land of Opportunity, not everyone gets the same opportunity.

I know many of you who have been victims of injustice yourself, from missing out on a deserved promotion to getting bullied at school to being a victim of abuse from someone you loved and trusted. For some of you, injustice is a daily reality.

Yet, amid this injustice, we are told that God is a just God. Not only that, but he is a good God, a loving God. Do you ever have a hard time reconciling these two

ideas? How can a good God allow so much injustice in the world? I know I’ve wrestled with that. I’m sure you have as well.

The question, this problem (i.e., the problem of evil), seems to raise itself in times like these, when we aren’t even worshipping in the same space this morning because of the threat of a virus that is sweeping the globe.

The problem of evil is so significant that it is one of the most common objections that skeptics and non-believers raise when considering Christianity or theism in general. This question keeps some people from coming to faith in the first place, and it causes others to walk away from God at some point. Perhaps this question has been so significant for you that you also have wondered if Christianity really could be true or if God even exists.

From why to who

We are in week three of our study of Job, in our series called “Shattered.” Many people look to the book of Job for answers to the problem of evil. How can a good and loving God allow the evil and injustice that we see in the world? Or the more personal question, Why am I suffering? Or why are my loved ones suffering?

This morning, we are going to look at Job chapters 4-31. Yes, that is 28 chapters in the next 28 minutes. Don’t worry; we will not cover every verse. The reason that we are covering so much ground today is that these chapters make up one long but distinct section of the book. In these chapters, Job and three of his friends go back and forth in a series of monologues, all trying to answer one question: Why? Why is Job suffering? What is the cause? What is the reason for his suffering?

As we listen to Job and his friends ask this question, we might also begin to ask this question of our own suffering. Why am I suffering? Or more generally, why is there so much injustice in the world? Why is life so unfair? Well, I hate to disappoint you, but the book of Job does not answer this question. In fact, Job never actually finds out why he is suffering. And, most of the time, we also do not get to learn the reason behind our suffering.

But remember, Job is not primarily a book about suffering. It is not a manual on how to suffer. It is not a philosophical explanation for why we suffer. Instead, Job is a book about God. The story of Job is trying to shape our view of God and our expectations of what life will be like in this world over which God is the sovereign king.

So, you will not walk away from this sermon with an answer to the question of why? But, as we explore the depth of God's word in the book of Job, as we listen to Job and his friends wrestle with the problem of evil (for 28 chapters!), my prayer is that you will walk away with greater confidence in the who; that is, in the God who is with you in the *why*.

Meet Job's friends

Two weeks ago, we looked at Job 1-2, where Job loses everything that he has in a single afternoon. Last week, Paul brought us through Job 3, where Job laments his loss. In between these two sections, right at the end of chapter 2, we skipped a small but important scene. In this scene, three of Job's friends show up. They are Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite.

When Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar appear in chapter 2, all they do is sit with Job. Like Job, they tear their robes and put ashes on their heads, and they sit with Job in silence for seven days and nights. This is Job's friends at their best, just sitting with Job and mourning with Job in silence.

If you are ever wondering what to say to someone who is grieving, follow this example from Job's friends. Just show up. Sit with them. Cry with them. You don't need to say anything.

While Job's friends get this right initially, they start to chime in after Job's lament in chapter 3. The question that they are trying to answer is *why?* For 28 chapters, Job and his three friends go back and forth, trying to explain why Job is suffering. The interesting thing is that we, as the readers, know why Job is suffering. God is allowing this suffering in response to an accusation from the challenger (i.e., *the satan*). The accusation is that Job only worships God because God blesses him, and so God agrees to remove his hand of protection from Job. But Job and his friends are completely unaware of this heavenly scene, so they are left asking why?

Their answers come in poetic form; there is a lot of repetition in these chapters. First Eliphaz speaks; then

Job responds. Bildad jumps in next; Job again responds. Zophar pipes in; Job responds. Three times this cycle repeats. Job and his friends are not so much having a dialogue. They don't respond directly to each others' comments. They end up speaking past each other a bit—Job giving one explanation for his suffering, and his friends collectively voicing another. While Job's friends do say slightly different things from each other, they are all essentially making the same argument, one that we will look at further in a moment.

You get what you deserve

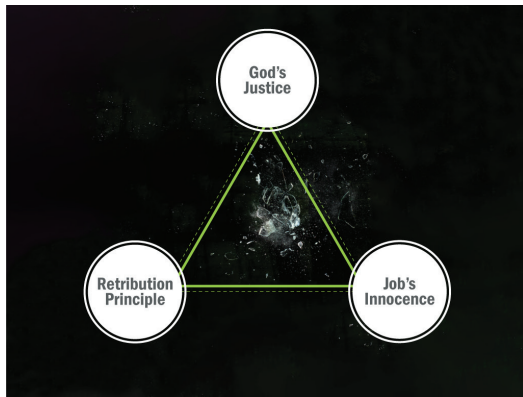
Before we look at their arguments, we need to understand the way that Job and his friends view the world. Job and his friends believe that the world operates according to something that some scholars call the Retribution Principle¹. The Retribution Principle, simply put, says this: The righteous prosper and the wicked suffer. In other words, you get what you deserve. That's not an absurd idea, is it? Good things happen to good people, and bad things happen to bad people. Not only that, but God is the one responsible for making sure that this happens. Justice, then, is when God enforces, blessing the innocent and punishing the guilty. The Retribution Principle was a common way of viewing the world in the ancient world, and it's a common way of viewing the world today.

If what happened to Job had happened to Hitler, most of us probably wouldn't be surprised, and we certainly wouldn't be upset. "He had it coming," we might say. That's the Retribution Principle. This is basically what we are taught in school—not in the curriculum but in the format. If you work hard, you will get good grades. You might not be at the top of the class, but you will do alright. If you slack off, eventually you'll pay the price. You get what you deserve—the Retribution Principle.

This is why the problem of evil is such a problem. The problem of evil doesn't ask why bad things happen to bad people. It asks why bad things happen to good people, because it doesn't seem like that should happen. I'm not talking about things like a stubbed toe. Maybe I deserved that. But the loss of a child? Sexual assault? Over 100,000 people infected by Coronavirus and over 3,500 killed? What could we have done to deserve that? That seems way out of proportion. And the reason that bothers us is that we ascribe to the Retribution Principle, a principle that the book of Job is going to make us question.

Destroying the equilibrium

There is a diagram from Old Testament scholars John Walton and Tremper Longman that is very helpful in illustrating the tension that Job and his friends are wrestling with throughout these chapters².



In this diagram, three premises sit at the corner of this triangle. At the top is God's justice. On the bottom right is Job's innocence. And on the bottom left is the Retribution Principle. Before Job begins to suffer, this triangle is well-balanced. According to the Retribution Principle, God ought to make the righteous prosper and let the wicked suffer. Job is righteous, and so he prospers. Thus, God is proved to be just.

However, as soon as Job begins to suffer, the triangle collapses. You must give up one of the corners. Either Job is not innocent. Or God is not just. Or it is not true that God's justice requires that the righteous prosper while the wicked suffer. This is the tension that Job and his friends are wrestling with.

As we go, we will see that this is also the tension that we find ourselves wrestling with as well. So let's take a look at what Job and his friends do in light of this tension.

Condemning Job

First, let's look at Job's friends. Throughout Job's friends' it becomes clear that they are uncompromising in their commitment to the Retribution Principle. This comes up almost immediately when Eliphaz, the first friend to speak, opens his mouth.

Job 4:7-8:

**“Remember: who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off?
8 As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and**

sow trouble reap the same. and sow trouble reap the same.

If there is one thing I know, Eliphaz says, it is that you get what you deserve. The innocent do not suffer. The guilty suffer! So, if Job is suffering, he must be guilty. There must be some sin, presumably some pretty terrible sin, that Job has committed in order to earn him the suffering that he is undergoing. This is exactly what we hear Zophar saying in chapter 11.

Job 11:4-6:

For you say, ‘My doctrine is pure, and I am clean in God’s eyes.’ But oh, that God would speak and open his lips to you, and that he would tell you the secrets of wisdom! For he is manifold in understanding. Know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves.

That's harsh! Not only does Zophar say that Job is guilty, he says that his punishment is less severe than he deserves. I'm not sure what he thinks Job must have done, but he is not accusing him of showing up late to class or sacrificing the wrong color ox. He's done something really serious.

In light of this, Job's friends' sage advice, on the lips of Bildad, is this:

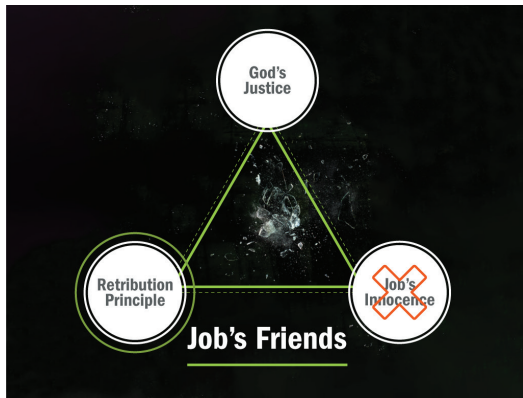
Job 8:5-6:

If you will seek God and plead with the Almighty for mercy, if you are pure and upright, surely then he will rouse himself for you and restore your rightful habitation.

Repent, and this will all be over. Admit your guilt and the suffering will end. Turn back to God, and he will restore your wealth, your power, your privilege.

This is Job's friends' consistent argument throughout this whole section.

They hold fast to the Retribution Principle. If there is one thing that they are convinced of, it is that the righteous prosper and the wicked suffer. They are on board with God's justice as well, though their emphasis is on the Retribution Principle. That is their rock. Since Job is suffering, the only plausible explanation in their minds is that Job is guilty. They must give up that corner of the triangle.

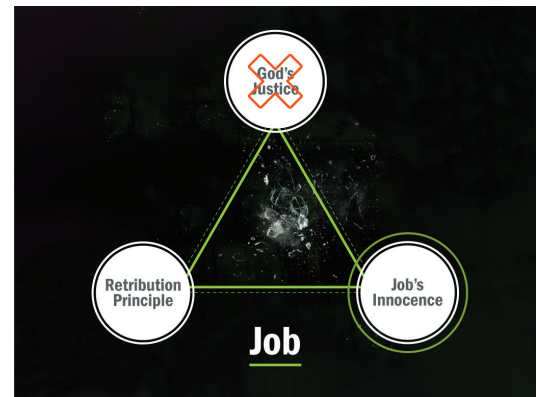


Job 6:30:

Is there any injustice on my tongue? Cannot my palate discern the cause of calamity?

I have done nothing wrong, Job says. Nothing! I have done no injustice. I don't know why I am suffering, but I am certain of one thing: I have done nothing to deserve this.

Think back to our triangle diagram.



We call it karma

This is one explanation that many people use for suffering in our world as well. We call it karma. The Hindu worldview is built on this view of suffering. The outcasts, or Dalits, as they call them, have been reincarnated into the lowest class of humanity as a punishment for the evil that they have done in previous lives. Their suffering is not unjust. Instead, it is a just punishment.

But you don't have to be Hindu to embrace karma. How often have you heard someone say, "Well, she got what she deserved," or "He had it coming." In tennis, we say, "The ball never lies," meaning that if you call a ball out that is actually in, the fates or the universe or God himself will correct your call when you lose the next point.

People also think this way about *eternity*. If there is a heaven, then I'm sure I'll get in because I'm a good person. I may not be Mother Teresa, but surely I don't deserve hell.

Job's friends have bought into this view hook, line, and sinker. So they are convinced that Job must be guilty. But we know something they don't. We know that Job IS innocent. God said as much to the challenger at the beginning of the story. Even after Job lost everything, we are told two times that he did not sin. Job is not suffering because he has done something to deserve it. Karma is not the answer.

Job maintains his innocence

What, then, is the answer? Why has Job suffered such a great loss? As Job wrestles with this question, he is going to come to a very different answer than his friends. In Job's mind, the one thing that he is certain about is that he is innocent.

Job is locked into the bottom right corner. There is no way he is budging on that one.

Like his friends, Job is generally on board with the Retribution Principle as well, with a slight modification. He can no longer believe that the righteous always suffer and the guilty always suffer because he is righteous, and yet he is suffering. But he does think that this is the way that the world is supposed to work. The righteous are supposed to prosper, not suffer. Job's only option the, following his logic, is to give up the top corner of the triangle: God must not be just.

Interestingly, throughout Job's argument, it becomes apparent that he does not believe that he is sinless. He is innocent, but not sinless. At one point, he charges God with holding him accountable for the sins of his youth (Job 13:26). At another point, he accuses God of being far too exacting, i.e. God is looking for any little reason to punish him (Job 17:17-21). In other words, Job thinks that God is being unreasonable. The crime does not fit the punishment. The suffering that Job is experiencing is way out of proportion with anything that Job has done wrong.

So Job accuses God. Some of his strongest language comes next.

Job 19:5-7:

If indeed you magnify yourselves against me and make my disgrace an argument against me, know then that God has put me in the wrong and closed his net about me. Behold, I cry out, ‘Violence!’ but I am not answered; I call for help, but there is no justice.

“There is no justice.” There it is. Job is convinced of his own innocence, and he believes that the innocent are not supposed to suffer. So he finds himself denying the justice of God.

Job goes ever further to say that he wishes that he could take God to court, that some other third party could serve as a judge between him and God, because God can no longer be trusted to judge rightly.

Job summarizes his thoughts in the next verses.

Job 23:12-15:

I have not departed from the commandment of his lips; I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my portion of food. But he is unchangeable, and who can turn him back? What he desires, that he does. For he will complete what he appoints for me, and many such things are in his mind. Therefore I am terrified at his presence; when I consider, I am in dread of him.

I am innocent. God is powerful, but he is not just. So, I am terrified of him.

That is a terrifying thought, isn't it? A God who is powerful, but who is not just. A God who can do whatever he wants, but can't be trusted to do what is right, what is good. That sounds terrifying to me.

This is exactly where so many people find themselves. It's an easy place to get end up. Think about: Most people think that we are pretty good. We are decent people. We're not perfect. Maybe we deserve a slap in the wrist here and there. A kick in the pants now and again. Perhaps even a smack in the face to knock some sense into us. But the loss of my health? The loss of my loved ones? The loss of my business? My house? My retirement? That is *much* worse than I deserve. If there is a God who would take all that from me, that is terrifying, and I don't want anything to do with him.

The only two options?

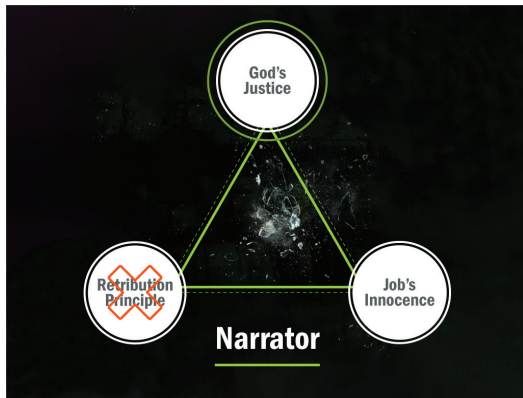
As and his friends wrestle with the "Why?" question (Why is Job suffering?), they come to two very different answers. Job's friends are convinced that Job must have done something to deserve his suffering. Job is convinced that he is innocent and that God has treated him unfairly.

These two responses to suffering are the two dominant temptations that we face when we experience suffering in our lives or in the world at large. Either we assume that karma is a play and that we are getting what we deserve. Or we assume that our suffering is out of proportion with our guilt, that our suffering is unjust, and that therefore God is unjust.

Have you ever found yourself in one of these two places? On the one hand, it seems inevitable. Either we are getting what we deserve, or we are being retreated unfairly. Unjustly. Right? What other option could there be?

When faced with this triangle of ideas in Job, we saw that Job's friends find themselves giving up Job's innocence. Job finds himself giving up God's justice. But what if the problem lies with assumption in the bottom left corner? What if the problem lies with the Retribution Principle itself? What if we suffer not because we deserve it or because God is unjust, but because sometimes in this fallen world innocent people suffer - with no explanation other than that the world is broken. What if God is just, but God does not always run the world according to a strict principle of justice? What if the Retribution Principle is too simple? What if God's justice does not require that the innocent always prosper and the guilty always sufferer?

This idea, we will see, is exactly where the book of Job is trying to push us. The narrator in the book of Job is trying to get us to see that the most certain thing in the world is God himself, including his justice. We must not give up on the character of God. We must not give up on the justice of God. The problem lies not with God's justice, with the Retribution Principle; with the assumption that God's justice requires him to enforce justice in the world at every turn, as if God were subject to some kind of strict, eternal principle of justice, requiring him to always protect "good" people from suffering



The Retribution Principle sounds good. It seems to make sense. However, when push comes to shove, this principle doesn't account for the complexity of life as we know it.

Death by a thousand principles

I don't know of any sphere of life that demonstrates this more clearly than parenting. As a parent, strict principles of justice don't always work. When I was in high school, I had a strict curfew. I knew there would be consequences if I were late. But one night I got home an hour late because my friend hadn't reset any of the clocks in their house after Daylight Saving Time. I should have realized this and still made it home on time. My parents would have been justified in holding me accountable for missing curfew. That would have been just. But they weighed the factors and decided to give me a pass.

In our house, my wife and I have a policy with our three-year-old that we don't eat dessert until after we are finished with dinner. But sometimes he is so excited about the dessert that he rushes through dinner without really filling up. When he finishes his dessert and it still hungry, what do we do? If we just let him keep eating, how will he ever learn? Do we make him go to bed hungry? That doesn't seem right. What do you do? There are no rules that help you in those situations. No principles that tell you what to do. Rules and principles are simply not sufficient.

Life is too complex for God to just say, "The righteous shall prosper and the guilty shall suffer. In every situation." That would never work.

Trusting the wisdom of God

So how then does God run the world? How does he carry out his will in the world? How does he determine what actions to take? He doesn't do it by following

strict rules (the Retribution Principle or otherwise). Rather, he runs the world according to his *wisdom*. In his wisdom, God gives his blessing when he sees fit. In his wisdom, God allows suffering and injustice in our lives. In his wisdom, he allows epidemics like Coronavirus. He allows forest fires and earthquakes. He allows mass shootings and genocide. He allows pain and suffering and death, because, for reasons that we will never know, in his wisdom, he sees fit to do so.

It's not that God is too weak to prevent our pain. It is not that God is too absent to see our suffering. It is not that God is unjust and cannot be trusted to do what is good and right. Rather, somehow and somehow, for some reason known only to God, in his wisdom, God allows pain, suffering, and injustice even when we don't understand it.

What do we do with that? Sometimes we run. Sometimes that idea is too much for us. But God would have us do something else. God would have us *trust* him. God would have us *trust his wisdom*. God would have us believe, even when it doesn't make sense to us, that his goodness is not threatened when we encounter injustice.

So trust the wisdom of God. Trust that the almighty King is still in control. Trust that the infinite and eternal Creator of heaven and earth knows what he is doing. Know that he loves you and that he has not abandoned you.

The folly of the cross

As Job and his friends wrestled with the question of why Job was suffering, they brought the best that human wisdom could bring. Their arguments were valid. They were sensible. They were wise from a human perspective. But human wisdom can only take us so far. In fact, God's wisdom often looks like foolishness from a human perspective.

In 1 Corinthians 1:18-19, the Apostle Paul says, "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.'"

From a human perspective, the cross is complete folly. Foolish through and through. When Jesus was hanging on the cross, he looked like the biggest fool of history. "You saved others. Save yourself!" He looked weak. He looked broken. He looked cursed.

But he wasn't. Paul continues a few verses later, in 1 Corinthians 1:30, "And because of him [God] you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption."

The cross is folly, but Jesus is the very wisdom of God. People accuse God of being unjust because of the injustice in the world, but never has there been a greater instance of injustice than the cross itself. The only man who was truly innocent — not just pretty good, not just above average, not even just above reproach, but actually and honestly perfectly pure in thought, in action and intention — that man was crucified. He died the most painful death imaginable. And in so doing, he bore the wrath of God so that we don't have to.

That is not just. But is it wise. It is good. It is full of grace and love and compassion. God is a just God. But he is also a wise God. And sometimes, in his wisdom, the we don't all get what we deserve.

Life's not fair, and you're lucky it's not

My dad used to say it all the time, "Life's not fair." But he didn't usually stop there. Usually, he would finish the sentence with, "...and you're lucky it's not." It's so true. Life is not fair. It is full of injustice. We are not on an equal playing field. For many people, the deck is stacked against them.

And yet, no matter what our plight may be in this life, we have been given more than we deserve. In Christ, we have been offered forgiveness. We have been given grace. We have been shown mercy. We are loved, even though we have done nothing to deserve it.

We say that we want justice in the world, but we don't actually want justice. We do not want to be given what we deserve. Instead, we want mercy, and that is exactly what we have been given in Jesus.

Life is not fair, and thank God that it is not.

We serve a God who is good. We serve a God who is powerful. We serve a God who is just. And we serve a God who is wise. He doesn't promise that life will be easy, but he does promise that he will be present with us in our pain, and that in his wisdom he is working all things for his glory and for our good.

Endnotes

1. Garson, "Life is Hard and Then You Die," Quote Investigator, October 16, 2016, <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2016/10/16/life-hard/>
1. John H Walton and Temper Longman III, How to Read Job (Downers Grove, IL:IVP Academic, 2015), 89.
2. Ibid.