

Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People? (The Book of Job)

Rich Nathan
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When Life is Unfair
Job 1

It's so good to be back with you. For those of you who are new here, I'm actually the senior pastor of Vineyard Columbus. You haven't seen me preach for the past couple of months. I've been on sabbatical. Marlene and I had a wonderful two months. We had the opportunity to go to Israel and a little bit of vacation. I also did a ton of reading. It's good to be back.

I did have an opportunity to hear many of the messages that were given during my absence and I just want to say that we have an incredible team of preachers here at Vineyard Columbus. I'm very grateful for my colleagues on staff.

Today, I want to start a series called "When Life is Unfair". Have any of you noticed this, by the way? Pain and suffering don't seem to be proportionate to people's goodness or badness necessarily. A woman, a committed Christian, shared this testimony:

If you'd asked me what I was thankful for a few months ago, I would have said I am thankful for my family, my home, my job and for God – for a husband who loves and cares for me, for four children (ages 14, 11, 9, 5) who are healthy and happy, for a home I never dreamed I could have, for a career that allows me to work from home, use my brain and make a difference for my company and my clients, and for a God who has provided me these things – regardless of my worthiness.

Then, a few months ago, completely out of the blue, my husband left me and our four children for someone else (who left her husband and two children as well). This other family were friends of ours; we vacationed with them on three separate occasions during the summer. I thought they were our friends.

I asked my husband what he was going to tell the kids; he said he didn't know. I told him, "You can't leave without telling the kids something." Surely, this would hit him – he wouldn't be able to look at those precious children and tell them he was leaving... but he did. He called them back downstairs from bed and told them he was leaving. They didn't understand... is this for work? When will you be back? No, kids, I'm moving out – not to come back. He left. We were crushed.

My kids are still dealing with the impact that their dad left; they are depressed, angry, confused and frustrated. My oldest has started questioning his faith; he's rebelling

against all authority and lashing out at his family. My house is up for sale – a short sale, that could turn into being a foreclosure. I have no idea where my family and I will move.

A committed wife and mom, her husband has unfairly left with another woman. In another Christian family, the mom and wife takes up with another man.

Here's another story from a physician.

In my training to be a physician, I participated in the care of untold numbers of tragedies: seven year olds being thrown from pick-up trucks, fatal automobile accidents, 25-year olds diagnosed with breast cancer, heart attacks on Christmas Day, etc. I have seen a lot. I have treated a lot. As I wrestled with these challenging circumstances, working through them with my husband, our faith was tested. But God increased our faith such that we trusted him, even if we didn't understand him.

In August 2012 (right after my mother died), we welcomed our third son in three years; our oldest child turned age three six weeks later. Life was nearly perfect again. 14 weeks later, on a beautiful and mild November afternoon, I returned from work into the blissful chaos of our home, just when our nanny was waking our baby from his nap. Her screams of terror took several seconds to penetrate my consciousness. I walked into our bedroom knowing exactly what happened. I knew my baby boy had died before I laid eyes on him.

How do we understand and respond to the seeming randomness and injustice of suffering? People often experience a disproportionate amount of suffering. Some people, it just seems that when it rains it pours. It's just one thing after another. Others mostly stay fine – no great sicknesses when they're young, no calamities, and no deaths until old age. And some really bad people seem to be able to skate right by, hurting lots of people along the way and never paying a price for all the damage they cause.

As I said, I'm starting a new series today titled "When Life is Unfair". We'll be tackling the issues of suffering and injustice from different angles and different biblical texts over the next two months. But if we look at the reasons why people stop believing in God or believe in God, why people decline in character or grow in character, why for some people God becomes less real for them and other people God becomes more real - what do we find at the heart of it? Almost always it's pain and suffering. Pain and suffering is at the heart of most people's stories of why they believe or why they don't believe. As I begin this series, my first talk is titled, "Why do Bad Things Happen to Good People?" Let's pray.

There's no book in the Bible that more squarely deals with the unfairness of life and not only the rational arguments that people made to try to justify the ways of God, but the emotions we experience when life is completely overwhelming or disappointing than

the book of Job. Let me give you a bit of introduction to the book of Job. Flip in your Bible to Job 1. I'd love to have you follow along in the Bible or to bring your Bible to church.

We read in Job 1:1-3 these words:

Slide Job 1:1-3

In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil. 2 He had seven sons and three daughters, 3 and he owned seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred donkeys, and had a large number of servants. He was the greatest man among all the people of the East.

Job had the ideal life in the ancient world. He had a full number of sons and daughters and herds so large that they couldn't be counted. He had many, many servants. He wasn't only a wealthy man, it says in verses 4-5:

Slide Job 1:4-5

His sons used to hold feasts in their homes on their birthdays, and they would invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. 5 When a period of feasting had run its course, Job would make arrangements for them to be purified. Early in the morning he would sacrifice a burnt offering for each of them, thinking, "Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts." This was Job's regular custom.

Job was one of those unusual people whose wealth did not build a wall between himself and God. There are some wealthy people like this who like Job, use their wealth to serve God and serve the poor. It talks about that in Job 29. He is an ideal man. He was not proud or self-sufficient like Pharaoh or Nebuchadnezzar in the Bible who said, "I'm responsible for all of my success. I am a self-made man." He was not arrogant in his use of wealth. He kept short accounts with God. He had a regular habit of sacrificing for sin. Job was a man who was vertically right with God and horizontally right with people.

The ideal life – a great family, enough money to do what you want to do; he used his surplus not on himself; he gave his surplus to those in need.

Anybody not want a life like that? A great family, plenty of money, lots of friends, a great relationship with God and a generous warm heart towards the poor and towards those in need?

And then we read in verses 6-8 these words:

Slide Job 1:6-8

One day the angels came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came with them. 7 The Lord said to Satan, “Where have you come from?” Satan answered the Lord, “From roaming through the earth and going back and forth in it.” 8 Then the Lord said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.”

And so a little contest arises when Satan and God speak to one another in verses 8-12:

Slide Job 1:8-12

Then the Lord said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.” 9 “Does Job fear God for nothing?” Satan replied. 10 “Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. 11 But now stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face.” 12 The Lord said to Satan, “Very well, then, everything he has is in your power, but on the man himself do not lay a finger.” Then Satan went out from the presence of the Lord.

And so Job’s trials begin in verses 13-15:

Slide Job 1:13-15

One day when Job’s sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother’s house, 14 a messenger came to Job and said, “The oxen were plowing and the donkeys were grazing nearby, 15 and the Sabeans attacked and made off with them. They put the servants to the sword, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!”

Job’s trials continue one after another.

Just as an aside, I would say that there are times in life where it seems like we are under assault from all directions. We’re under siege. It is not just one thing, it is everything. Any of you ever experience that? Maybe how it’s like you’re being attacked from all directions. When it rains, it pours. That was Job.

As the story continues, Job’s children are killed and he himself suffers painful boils. His body is racked with searing pain.

Throughout world history, every culture has been in touch with the reality of pain and suffering and the fact that pain and suffering do not seem to be fairly distributed. Some people seem to suffer so much more than others.

What I’d like to do as we start this series is to just talk about three big philosophies to explain life’s unfairness.

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Three big philosophies to explain life's unfairness

Every culture has come up with an explanation for life's unfairness. We could, if we had the time, explore the Buddhist approach to life's unfairness, the Muslim approach. Or even the Stoic approach to life's unfairness. But today I just want to tackle three of the most popular approaches in human history.

The first is

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The philosophy of karma: life is fair

You know what karma is, right? You've seen the bumper sticker, "What goes around comes around". Karma is a b – and you can fill in the blank.

We all hold on fiercely to this myth of karma, that life should be fair because God is fair. We should only suffer if we've done something wrong. We should be blessed, life should work smoothly if we just follow the rules.

There are many Bible passages that can be cited in support of this. We see this in the book of Proverbs. There is according to Proverbs an order to this world and if we violate the order, we destroy ourselves. If you violate the physical order by jumping off of a building, you will destroy yourself physically. If you violate the biological order by drinking too much or abusing drugs, or by having promiscuous sex, you can destroy yourself biologically. If you violate the relational order by being unkind to your spouse, or by having an affair, you will destroy your marriage. If you violate the spiritual order by neglecting your relationship with God, refusing to confess your sins, rejecting God's offer of forgiveness through faith in his son Jesus Christ, you will destroy yourself spiritually. We see in the book of Proverbs that when you run your hand across the grain of the universe, you pick up splinters.

But then we come to the book of Job. Job suffered virtually everything a person could suffer. He suffered the loss of all of his possessions. His business has absolutely failed. He lost his reputation. Children and old people mocked him in his community. He lost of each his beloved sons and daughters. And Job, himself, was wracked with great physical pain – pain that plagued him from morning till night.

It is hard to conceive of worse suffering than the suffering of Job. How do we explain it? Job's so-called friends explained Job's suffering as being the deserved payment for Job's sins. "You are reaping what you sowed. What goes around comes around!"

The problem with this analysis of Job's condition is that his friends' accusations are all false. Job was not an evil man. Job did not mistreat the poor or send the hungry away empty. Job was a good man. We see that in the very first verse of the book of Job where we read:

Slide Job 1:1

In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil.

He lived the Proverbs life of wisdom – fearing God and shunning evil.

Not only does the author of the book of Job tell us that Job was good, but God himself says Job is a good man. Look at Job 1:8:

Slide Job 1:8

Then the Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil."

Yes, the book of Proverbs offers us general principles of life, that life goes better for you, if you obey God's law than if you don't. As a general rule, hard work leads to success, and as a general rule, if we sin, we'll get it in the neck.

But not always. People don't always get what they deserve. Do you think that the bank executives and Wall Street brokerage firms that helped to plunge our world into a global recession from which many people have still not recovered got what they deserved? Especially when their companies were bailed out when many of them walked away with millions and millions of dollars in buy-out packages. And one of them went to prison.

You know, the problem for the Christian exclusively leaning on the principle that we always reap what we sow is that it contradicts the fundamental Christian doctrine of grace. Grace is God giving us what we do not deserve and have not earned. If we insist that people should only get what they deserve, if we say yes to karma, "You only reap what you sow – no more and no less." You are rejecting the Christian notion of grace – God giving us more than we deserve and better than what we deserve. Which one of us has earned the death of Jesus for our sins? Who here has earned God's forgiveness? Who would be so bold as to say I have earned my way based on what I've done into God's holy presence? I deserve God's blessing on my life.

The second great explanation for life's unfairness is:

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The philosophy of dualism: life is a battleground

Like karma, this second philosophy also holds some truth. There is a war going on. I continually have reminded you that there is another team on the field. Christians are not just fighting against flesh and blood. The Bible speaks a great deal about spiritual forces of wickedness in high places opposing us. The Bible takes the existence of Satan and demons with deadly seriousness. As followers of Jesus it's impossible to dismiss the reality of spiritual warfare, spiritual evil as some medieval myth. You really can be under spiritual attack. But Job undercuts this philosophy of dualism which says essentially that there are these two equal and opposing forces in the universe. A force of good allied with God and a force of evil allied with Satan. They are both equal in power. It's all just a crap shoot which one wins.

In Job 1, we see that God had to permit Satan to attack Job. Satan is not an independent force. God is still completely in charge. God has total control over Satan. Satan can go so far, but he can go no further. God is the only sovereign King.

The third big philosophy along with karma and dualism is:

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The philosophy of the secular world: life is totally random

There are any number of books by the so-called new atheists. People like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris, whose books you could find almost anywhere in the western world. Essentially the message of these books is that there really isn't a problem of pain and evil or a problem of the so-called "unfairness" of life. These things that we experience are simply the result of blind, random evolutionary chance. There is no God. There is no ultimate meaning. Deal with it. People say, "Oh these New Atheists are so daring! They are so courageous in their attacks on God and his justice!"

I remember reading a review of Richard Dawkins' best-selling book, *The God Delusion* some years ago. The review was written by a man named H. Allen Orr. He's an evolutionary biologist. He wrote this in his review in the *New York Review of Books*:

"I used to think of Mr. Dawkins as a "professional atheist." I'm forced, after reading his new book, to conclude that he's more of an amateur."

You see, Orr goes on to argue that if you are going to attack religion or theology, you ought to at least try to know a little bit about the subject you're attacking. So, Mr. Orr goes on and writes:

"The most disappointing feature of *The God Delusion* is Dawkins' failure to engage religious thought in any serious way. You'll find no serious examination of Christian or

Jewish theology and no attempt to follow philosophical debate about the nature of religious proposition. In other words, he just erects straw men and knocks them down.”

The truth is, brothers and sisters, that the most searing attack on God and on faith have not come from the New Atheists, but from deeply committed religious believers. All you need to do is read the book of Job. Job never goes to the place of saying there is no God. He knows there’s a God. But he rages at God. He pours out his complaint in what the Bible would call a lament. Searingly honest complaints with the way he feels he’s been treated by God. If you want to read the most thoughtful and emotionally honest complaints about the ways of God in this world, don’t read books by the New Atheists. Read the writings of believers. Jewish believers like Elie Wiesel who wrote about his experience in the Holocaust. Many people assume that Wiesel became an unbeliever as a result of his experience in the Auschwitz and Buchenwald extermination camps. But Wiesel did not lose his faith. He remained deeply observant Orthodox Jewish believer his whole life.

If you’re a reader, pick up Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* and read the section on the Grand Inquisitor. There you see the complaint about injustice laid out in the clearest and most honest way. And this came from a deeply committed follower of Jesus.

C.S. Lewis, my favorite Christian writer, responded brilliantly to the idea that life is just random.

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If the universe is so bad and so rotten, how on earth did human beings ever come up with belief in a beneficent, supreme, loving, all-wise, and all good Creator unless, of course, such a good God exists and revealed himself to us? The very idea that something is evil means that we have in our minds a standard of what is right and good. That standard has to be accounted for somewhere. When we push back, we are pushing against something solid, not just air. When we react, and rebel and rage, we are reacting, rebelling and raging against someone who exists, a good God.

There are lots of different approaches that people have taken throughout the ages to the experience of suffering, to the just sheer injustice of life, the fact that pain and suffering are not evenly or fairly distributed. Good people often seem to suffer more than bad people. Bad people seem to get off scot free. We’ll be thinking throughout this series about different ways we can get some handholds so that our faith doesn’t slip away when we suffer. No one can answer the question of suffering exhaustively, but through the series I hope to offer some partial answers, some helpful approaches that the Bible and Christian thinkers have offered through the ages. Let me close with:

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Three big responses to live successfully despite life's unfairness

If the book of Job is true, indeed if the Bible is true, that there is a God. If Jesus is true, that he is who he said he is – God come in the flesh to save us. If Jesus really did die in our place for our sins and really did rise from the dead, if one day Jesus really will come back and end suffering and end pain and bring justice to this universe – then how do we respond now to the sudden, unwanted, painful intrusions of suffering or injustice in our own lives or in the lives of loved ones or the incredible amount of injustice and suffering that we see every day in the world? I'm going to give you three basic responses that I believe we need to have to successfully live lives of faith despite life's unfairness. The first response of faith is that:

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God is there whether I feel him or not

In the Old Testament, there's a wonderful story of a man named Joseph who was a good man. But he was rejected by his brothers because he was the favorite of his father. He was sold by his brothers into slavery. Almost killed by his own family. Life seems to be turning around for Joseph in the land of Egypt when he is unjustly accused of sexual assault by a woman he's working for. As a result of this unjust accusation, he is thrown into prison. He didn't do anything wrong and yet he's put in jail. In Genesis 39, we read:

Slide Genesis 39:20b-21a

But while Joseph was there in the prison, the LORD was with him;

Now, I'm not sure if during the two years that Joseph was in prison, he was aware of God's presence. I'm not sure that if you asked Joseph, "Do you know God is with you?" If he would have said, "Yes! I just feel his presence. My body is just tingling." Or if Joseph would have honestly said, "Well, if God is with me why am I in this dungeon? Why am I being treated this way?"

Throughout the story of Joseph, we constantly read that the Lord was with him. During times of trial and disappointment, when we're going through our own dark nights of the soul, brothers and sisters we simply cannot rely on our feelings as reliable guides for whether God is there or not. I've talked with so many folks over the years that deny that God is with them because during crisis, during hard times they didn't feel God's presence. It's at those times we have to say, "You know what, I'm going to choose to believe that the Bible is true, and that Jesus is who he said he is. He really is God come in the flesh. He really did die on a cross in my place for my sins and rise from the dead. Jesus is coming back to set everything right. I'm going to trust that God is here with me whether I feel his presence or not."

Another big response to live successfully despite life's unfairness is:

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God is worth trusting whether I understand him or not

So, this simple statement “I don’t understand why this is happening or why this happened” is said in so many different ways. I don’t understand why my child died, why my spouse died, I was fired, I was unjustly accused, this natural disaster is happening. You know the question “why?” can be said to God as a simple, honest confession. Lots of people in the Bible cry out to God and ask, “Why?”

Slide Psalm 10:1

¹ Why, LORD, do you stand far off?
Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?

Slide Psalm 42:9

⁹ I say to God my Rock,
“Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I go about mourning,
oppressed by the enemy?”

Jesus is absolutely perfect and never sinned. Yet when he was hanging on the cross, he asked God “Why? Why have you forsaken me?” The question why can be a simple, humble confession. The book of Job tells us we are too small, too limited, and too dumb to understand the ways of God and all that goes into the arrangement of the world and suffering.

But the question “Why?” can also be asked not as an honest confession but as a demand. “You, God, must justify yourself to me! If I’m going to trust you, you have to explain this situation to me in a way so that I can understand what you’re up to and why this particular thing happened to me or to someone I love.”

We all want an explanation from God. But the truth is when you really think about it, how much do we really understand about anything? If you work for a large company, how many of the jobs in that large company do you think you could competently do? I could do any job in this company with excellence. I could handle all the IT. I could do all the accounting. I could do engineering. I could do the marketing. I could handle the reception desk. I could do all the custodial work and the graphic arts. I could do everything.

How many of you could say, “I could competently represent somebody in court.”? Raise your hand. How many of you that are raising your hands can also competently back up a big rig? And hit a curveball that’s thrown at you at 95 MPH? And make a soufflé?

If we cannot competently do human job, why do we believe that we could competently do God's job, which is to run the universe? Sure, we could ask God why. But the truth is that we are small and limited as we discover in the book of Job. Even if God even wanted to explain himself to us could not because we wouldn't understand anyway.

If we are going to live successfully in the face of unfairness, we need to remember that

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God is there whether I feel him or not

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God is worth trusting whether I understand him or not

And finally:

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God is worth servicing whether I receive anything from him or not

The test that Job was unaware of in the book of Job is laid out for us in Job 1. God points to Job as his finest servant.

Slide Job 1:8

⁸Then the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil."

Satan, whose name means accuser, immediately accuses Job of acting in his own self-interest. Here's what he says:

Slide Job 1:9-11

⁹"Does Job fear God for nothing?" Satan replied. ¹⁰"Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. ¹¹But now stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face."

Satan accuses Job of not really loving God for God's sake, but for the blessings that you give him. He's just in it for the benefits. But you remove the benefits and he will curse you to your face. He doesn't love you for you. He loves you for what you do for him. So God sets up a test. He says, "OK. You say that Job doesn't love me for me. Take everything away and let's see." Talk about a test of love. So often we only someone who loves us back.

I always ask people before I do their wedding during pre-marital counseling, tell me why you want to get married. Why do you love this other person? Everyone lists positive qualities in their fiancé. Well, they're kind or they're beautiful. They're smart. They're funny. They listen to me. Those are all very attractive reasons to care about and to love another person, but over the course of a marriage, sometimes those things go away. That person gets older and stops being so beautiful or they suffer an injury or memory loss and they are no longer athletic or intelligent. How do you know if you really love someone? Just for them? It's not when that person is filled with lots of positive qualities. It's when those qualities begin to go away and you're getting almost nothing from the relationship. Is Job loving and serving you because of you God, or because of what you give him?

Many years ago, C.S. Lewis wrote a book called *The Screwtape Letters* which were imaginary letters written from the perspective of a senior devil who was trying to train a junior devil in the art of temptation. This older devil, Uncle Screwtape, writes his young nephew and says this:

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Do not be deceived, Wormwood. Our cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending to do our Enemy's [God] will, looks upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys.

Even the devils know that there is nothing more powerful than a Christian who has lost everything and says, nevertheless, I'm still going to continue to love and serve the Lord.

Gospel Call

You know, there was someone who did this better than any of us. He loved and served the Lord all the way to death when everything was taken from him. The person I'm talking about, of course, is Jesus. He lost all his friends. One of his best friends betrayed him. He lost his reputation in the community. He was unjustly accused and unjustly tried and beaten. He was spit on. He was nailed to a cross. He was in excruciating pain and never stopped serving and obeying God.

There are some of you who have never made a decision to accept what Jesus has done on your behalf, to die for your sins, to offer you forgiveness. Some of you have never made a clear decision to completely surrender your life to Jesus who obeyed God to the point of death and then rose from the dead. Today, if you want to completely surrender your life to Jesus, I'm going to ask you to stand up right now.

Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?

Rich Nathan

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