

## Job 4 'Don't We All Get What We Deserve?'

Elisabeth has not been baptised into a community of people who have all the answers. She has been baptized into a community of people who live by faith. That is, we live by trusting in God. Our trusting involves worshipping, serving, working, teaching, questioning and sometimes even, arguing. Real, live, faith is always more conversation than conclusion. We have found in the last number of weeks that there are conversations within the Bible, conversations that leap off of the page and draw us in. We've been listening to the book of Job.

Job was faithful, prosperous and blessed. One day, out of the blue his whole world collapses and he has no idea why. He loses everything. Some time later his health goes. His wife encourages Job to curse God and die.

The big question early in Job is simple: Will Job curse God for his pain and suffering? Or, will he hang on to God?

Job does curse. He curses the day of his birth. His life is so painful he wishes he had never been born. We heard his pain last week in chapter three. What Job said was shocking and unexpected.

It shocked his friends too. Remember his friends? They had heard of Job's suffering and come to be with him. They sat in silence for seven days and nights. They listened, as we did to Job's lament.

Now, they begin to speak. Their conversation will go back and forth for much of the rest of the book. The first and main speaker is Eliphaz the Temanite. Let's listen:

## Read Job 4

Eliphaz and the others are confronted with a situation they have never dealt with before and cannot imagine. They draw on their best wisdom. This morning I want to share with you what they say in summary from chapters 4 to 37. (James Wharton)

1. God's governance of the universe is supremely wise, **just**, and compassionate.

*God knows what he is doing. Everything is in God's hands. God does not make mistakes.* God rules. Muslims have a phrase that you may recognize.

'Inshallah', or, 'as God wills'. We know this as well from the book of James, where James says that before making our own plans we should say, 'if the Lord wills'. We know it from bumper stickers that say, 'if you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans'.

"So Job, accept that what is happening is fair".

2. Human wisdom cannot comprehend all the ways of God, who "does great things and unsearchable, marvellous things without number". (5:9) 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts' declares the Lord'. (Isaiah 55:8-9) 'God moves in mysterious ways'. We say things like that to each other too.

"Job, you can't understand what God is doing in your life".

3. We can trust that because God is just and fair, that he punishes the wicked and rewards the righteous **in this life**. In the great struggle for civil rights, Martin Luther King said, "I am convinced that we shall overcome because **the arc of the universe**

**is long** but it bends toward justice.” King was deeply convinced that God is on the side of the right and against the wrong. It gave him courage to keep going. We hear echoes of this idea when people say, ‘what goes around, comes around’.

“Job, why do you think these disasters have come upon you?”

4. By our very nature as God’s fragile creatures, none of us may claim to be altogether innocent in God’s eyes. ‘We are all sinners. Isaiah says, ‘all we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned every one to his own way. The Messiah drives that thought deep into our hearts with its echoing refrain, ‘every one to his own way’. When Rabbi Kushner asked, “Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People”, the Reformed answer was, ‘there are no good people’.

At this point the friends are starting to get frustrated, “Job, stop claiming that you are innocent. No one is.”

5. Nevertheless, God distinguishes between the righteous and the wicked among us in ways we can understand and for which we are held accountable. The ‘ways we can understand’ are a special way of ‘people watching’. Someone who is suffering, is suffering under the judgment of God, and must have done something wrong to deserve it. Someone who is successful is receiving the blessing of God for their good life. Jesus was asked once about a man who was born blind. “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?” The questioners were coming from the same background as Job’s friends.

“Maybe there is something you have forgotten Job, examine your conscience more closely!”

6. The righteous are above all those who “fear God,” that is, who accept whatever comes to us in this life as the expression of God’s just and righteous will. This is to be mirrored in attitudes and actions toward others marked by justice and compassion. Righteous people don’t complain against the ways of God. Righteous people accept what God sends them as coming from his ‘fatherly hand’.

“Job, you are not behaving like a righteous person when you protest so much!”

7. The wicked are above all those who “bid defiance to the Almighty” (15:25) in thought, word and deed, from angry complaints against one’s lot in life to the foolish supposition that God neither knows nor cares about what we do on earth, to acts of greed and oppression against the powerless. In all these ways the wicked defy the justice, righteousness and compassion of God.

“Now you really better be careful Job!”

8. While no suffering is ever “innocent” (see point 4 above), even relatively righteous people may undergo periods of intense suffering that are not related to any specific unrighteousness of which they are aware. In such cases, the righteous turn to God with renewed repentance, accepting the suffering as God’s just and benevolent act of “reproving” them or “disciplining” them toward greater faithfulness. The writer to the Hebrews talks about suffering in this way. ‘The Lord disciplines those he loves’.

“There must be something you need to learn from this Job, what could it be?”

9. While the wicked may flourish for a time, and the righteous may undergo temporary “chastisement,” the ultimate victory of God over the wicked and on behalf of the righteous is absolutely assured.

“Job, this cannot last, one day God will act on behalf of the righteous. You are righteous, aren't you?”

There is of course one problem. Job is innocent, he is righteous and his suffering is out of this world. **We** know he is innocent. Job knows it. His friends cannot imagine that he can be, after all, look what “the Lord” has brought on his head! They become more angry and aggressive and impatient with Job as the book goes on. Their words actually make Job's suffering worse.

**Three things to realize.** One, the discussion matters a lot. These really are important questions. The conversations in Job, the questions asked, the advice given, sometimes it really is true. Sometimes the Lord **does** discipline us through the events in our lives. If we think carefully about the way our lives have gone we can only make that conclusion.

When we think about the suffering in the world, there is a time and a place to ask hard questions. Why are these people starving? What is going on here? What are the political factors at work? What is the best way to help so that this country can get some traction and move ahead?

Two: When we are in pain, it is not usually the time for philosophical or theological discussions. It certainly is not the place for someone to imply that our suffering is something we have brought on ourselves. We need a friend. Job says so 'A despairing man should have the devotion of his friends'. (6:14)

People cannot eat arguments. A discussion about causes does not prevent this child from dying. Starvation calls for action. Disease, loneliness, pain, these things call for help, right away.

Three: I remind you simply that Jesus is 'Immanuel', God with us. In Jesus, God himself comes, not to tell us why, not to condemn us, but to be with us. So that Psalm 23 about the valley of the shadow, and Isaiah 42 about going through fire or flood, really are true in the presence of the one who said, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age".

In his name we are called to care for, and to act for those in pain.

May the Lord be gracious to you.

May the Lord be gracious to me.

And all God's people said, Amen.