

Reading Job

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Who or what is the [book of Job](#) about? Many of us would say the book is the story of Job and about the problem of suffering. When in the past I read Job as the Bible's discussion of why bad things happen to good people, I found it a frustrating book. While the question of suffering is discussed for chapter after chapter, the question of why people suffer isn't ever answered--even when God shows up and speaks to Job. God doesn't answer Job's and my question. This makes the book a frustrating read.

But what if we ask a different question? What if we, assuming God is the main character in this story, ask what does this story tell us about God? What do you think?

Careful. I didn't ask what does this story tell us about God's relationship to and involvement with suffering. I asked what does this story tell us about God? What does this story tell us about God's relationship with us?

Here are some initial thoughts;

- God isn't reducible to doctrines and explanations.
- God is intimately involved in the complexities of the world.
- Somehow, God is involved in the world's suffering.
- God doesn't mind if we challenge God and ask tough questions, even demanding a hearing.
- God is present with us and listens and responds to us, but doesn't necessarily give us answers.

What would you add to this list?

As I re-read Job recently, I was struck by how theologically at home Job's friends would be in 2012.

Then Eliphaz from Teman spoke up: Would you mind if I said something to you? Under the circumstances it's hard to keep quiet... Think! Has a truly innocent person ever ended up on the scrap heap? Do genuinely upright people ever lose out in the end? It's my observation that those who plow evil and sow trouble reap evil and trouble. One breath from God and they fall apart, one blast of his anger and there's nothing left of them." Job 4:1,7-9, *The Message*

Bildad from Shuhah was next to speak: How can you keep on talking like this? You're talking nonsense, and noisy nonsense at that. Does God mess up? Does God Almighty ever get things backwards? It's plain that your children sinned against him- otherwise, why would God have punished them? Here's what you must do- and don't put it off any longer: Get down on your knees before God Almighty. If you're as innocent and upright as you say, it's not too late- he'll come running; he'll set everything right again, reestablish your fortunes. Job 8:1-7 *The Message*

Give in to God, come to terms with him and everything will turn out just fine. Let him tell you what to do; take his words to heart. Come back to God Almighty and he'll rebuild your life. Clean house of everything evil. Relax your grip on your money and abandon your gold-plated luxury. God Almighty will be your treasure, more wealth than you can imagine. You'll take delight in God, the Mighty One, and look to him joyfully, boldly. You'll pray to him and he'll listen; he'll help you do what you've promised. You'll decide what you want and it will happen; your life will be bathed in light. You those who feel low you'll say, 'Chin up! Be brave!' and God will save them. Yes, even the guilty will escape, escape through God's grace in your life. Job 22: 21-30 *The Message*

That God punishes bad people and reward good people is an ancient and powerful concept. It is one we hold onto in spite of evidence to the contrary. It's an understandable idea. Cause and effect. It appeals to our sense of order and justice. It is how we would do things if we were in charge.

Part of the message of Job is that this is not how God does things. Frustratingly, Job doesn't tell us how God does things, it doesn't tell us exactly how God is involved in suffering. However, whatever that involvement is, it isn't simple cause and effect.

What we do know is that God present and involved--even if we don't know how or why.

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