

Job's search for a just court (Job 23:1-9, 16-17)

He yearns to be able to lay his case before God.

by [Jesper Svartvik](#)

October 8, 2021

To receive these posts by email each Monday, [sign up](#).

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

There have always been multiple ways of describing Christian faith.

In the synoptic tradition the imagery is often taken from occupational groups in the Galilean society—the possibilities and challenges for farmers, fishermen, and traders.

There are times when Paul in his letters likens us to athletes who participate in running competitions (1 Cor. 9:24–26; Phil. 3:14). He emphasizes that the runners have all their attention focused on the goal: there is nothing else in their minds than to win the victory wreath. Here it is the struggling motif that dominates.

In the Fourth Gospel Christian life is sometimes likened to the growth in nature, such as in chapter 15, where Jesus says, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. . . . Abide in me as I abide in you.” John emphasizes that Christians need to be near the Son in order to be nurtured by him.

In the church and especially in the Reformation tradition, Christians have often been likened to people in court, who are charged with a crime and possibly face capital punishment, but who are eventually acquitted or pardoned by the judge. We certainly find this legal language in the Bible, and every human being is likely to experience moments of despair, to need forgiveness, or to long for reconciliation and redemption. The dread of not performing well enough, of not sufficing in the eyes of others, of not being worthy afflicts many if not most of us, because questions

of sin, guilt, and forgiveness are universal. The church's message of divine forgiveness of sins is a balm for troubled souls.

So it's interesting that in the book of Job, the roles in the image of the court are somewhat different. Job *wishes* to go to court, he *yearns* to be able to lay his case before God, because he is confident that he would be acquitted forever by the judge. His problem is that the just court cannot be found. He searches and scouts in all four directions of the compass, but the court and its judge are nowhere to be found.

In other words, in the book of Job it is divine *absence* that is the key theological problem, not the *omnipresence* of human sin and guilt. This can serve as a reminder that when Christians encounter those who suffer, we can't let our only language be that of sin and guilt.

In *How to Read the Bible and Still Be a Christian*, John Dominic Crossan famously describes the book of Job as "but a speed bump on the Deuteronomistic superhighway," by which he means that readers of the Bible in general have overemphasized the connection between what we do and what we suffer. "For they sow the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind," says the book of Hosea (8:7). And there are certainly times when we reap what we sow—as in the story about the prisoner who was working with needle and thread when someone said, "so here you are, sewing." His laconic reply: "No, I am reaping."

Yes, sometimes we reap what we sow. But the book of Job reminds us that life is much more complicated than that, and that the problem of evil cannot be reduced to phrases and proverbs.