

Pre-Intro – Israel with Alex and Jed – [Meet Alex in the atrium or email Alex - alexe@cccomaha.org](mailto:alexe@cccomaha.org)

Have you ever made a deal with God? Like... I promise to do something, then I expect something in return.

- I know when I was a high school gymnast, I regularly prayed that God would make me a champion and I promised if I was that I would give him the glory and the credit. Unfortunately I was a 6 foot three inch gymnast, which is not a good formula for being a champion. So, my promises were irrelevant.
- I know a guy who recently confessed some disappointment when the stock market tanked. He is a faithful guy who was tithing and beyond and kinda thought the deal was that if he was faithful, he could avoid huge financial losses.
- I remember when Kelle and I had our second miscarriage. I was 25. In ministry. Making no money. Travelling around the state telling people of God's goodness. And I thought "Here I am sacrificing for you and this is how you treat me? Can anybody relate to these prayers?"

These are all examples of the **Retribution Principle** Good things come to good people. Bad things come to bad people – And the converse is true as well – if you see a person who is prosperous and healthy – it must be because they were a good person. If you see a person in pain, they must have done something to deserve that. The book of Job, more than any other subject – more than suffering, or science, or faith, is actually a treatise on the retribution principle.

In the ancient world, according to Ugaritic tablets (found in Ugarit, Caanan) and other contemporaries to Job, there was a very clear relationship between humanity and the gods. Common practice was to bring food offerings to the temple in order to feed the gods. You would then ask the gods to send rain for your crops. Or avoid locusts. And there was this bargaining going on. "I'll do this for you if you do that for me." It was implicit, contractual, behavior of I do good for you and you do good for me.

This is known as "the great symbiosis". People meet the needs of the Gods and the god's meet the needs of the people. Needs define the system and "Doing Right" MEANS meeting the needs of the Gods. This would be the assumption of Job, Job's culture and Job's friends. Now... can you see how radical the book of Job is in this milieu? Job is someone who DOES GOOD... and yet gets whacked. The challenger questions the notion that good people are authentic in their worship and that God is wise in the way he is handling humans. If God won't reward you for your behavior, then why serve the god at all?

Job would make no sense to the ancient Canaanites or Babylonians. It would be a radical departure from common knowledge. We look back with our Biblical lens and can say "Of course God has no needs." "Of course we should worship in good times and bad." But back then, these ideas were revolutionary.

This, I think is why Job had such staying power. Why it lasted 4,000 years. Why it made such a dent in human literature.

But, this idea of the retribution principle is not limited to the ancient world. It is common in the USA too.

Common examples

- A person in crisis says “if you just save my sister, I’ll go to church every Sunday from now on.”
- Purity culture taught overtly that if you save yourself until marriage that means you will have a great marriage or a great sex life in marriage.
- Out on the golf course, someone hits a ball into the trees that bangs around and bounces into the fairway. And somebody says “clean living” OR “You must have paid your member dues this month.” Good fortune smiles on good people.
- A corporate executive spends time volunteering under the assumption that if he is a good person, “The Universe” will make his business ventures successful
- Or even in Christian circles is a wrongheaded doctrine called the “Prosperity Gospel”. The idea is that if you serve God faithfully, you deserve health and wealth. That it is, in fact, a sign of God’s blessing.

Now, it must be said that some parts of this kind of thinking are actually true. Work hard in school and you tend to get better grades. Raise your kids well and they tend to be healthy adults. Smoke cigarettes and you are more likely to get lung cancer. And there is a whole book of the Bible called “Proverbs” that are full of these ideas that tend to be true. The retribution principle, however, positions them not as GENERALLY true, but as UNIVERSALLY true. It is a version of the Law of Karma from hinduism. Or the Americanism “what goes around comes around.”

26 chapters this is debated with Job and his three friends. Some think that Job is on trial...he is. Some think that God’s goodness and wisdom is on trial... it is. But the biggest of the three is the Retribution principle.

Three Friends – Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar

- Eliphaz the Temanite is the sensitive one. Teman was a city in Edom and it was an educational center of the day. Eliphaz is the most sensitive and kind. He is the opener of each debate section.
- **Bildad the Shuhite** – we have no idea where Shuha was, but we do know that Bildad is the second shortest man in the Bible. Bildad the SHOE -height? Just shorter than knee-high-miah! Just taller than the Philippian jailer who slept on his watch.
- **Zophar the Naamathite** – who is just fun to read because he is so feisty – a hot head. He says the most triggering things to Job. A great guy for humor value. Job does major sarcastic slam dunks on him.

Triangle of Tension – The goodness of God, the character of Job, the retribution principle. Job debates his three friends in eight rounds. EVERY time the friends argue that Job’s goodness is to blame. They won’t question God’s character, they don’t question the retribution principle. Yet we know from the first chapter that Job is a righteous dude. So it is up to Job to walk through this confusion without any allies. But his “friends” prove to be good sounding boards, leading him to multiple dead ends and eventually some good learning.

Structure of the debates

- 1) Good people get good things -
 - a. Eliphaz-Job
 - b. Bildad-Job
 - c. Zophar- Job
 - d. For Example: Eliphaz in Job 4:6-7
 - i. Should not your piety be your confidence
and your blameless ways your hope?
 - ii. “Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished?
Where were the upright ever destroyed?
 - e. Or Bildad in 8:5-6
 - i. But if you will seek God earnestly
and plead with the Almighty,
⁶ if you are pure and upright,
even now he will rouse himself on your behalf
and restore you to your prosperous state.
 - f. The idea here is pretty simple. Innocent people don’t get punished, Job! God is good. Maybe if you seek him and repent and act pure, you can get your stuff back. And every time, Job just argues back – I worship and honor God. I didn’t do anything to deserve this.
- 2) Bad people get bad things
 - a. Eliphaz-Job
 - b. Bildad – Job
 - c. Zophar – Job
 - d. For Example:20:6-7, 16-18 – This is one of my favorite chapters. It is a poetic smackdown of unrighteous people. Here, Zophar lets loose on all of the punishments that come on unrighteous people. I’ll just read a few verses, but if you read all of chapter 20, it just piles on and lands the person in an existence that is remarkably like the hell of the new testament. Sometimes, I read this stuff and feel like I need an East German accent, you know? Because all of the bad guys in Marvel movies all have Eastern European accents.
 - i. Though the pride of the godless person reaches to the heavens
and his head touches the clouds,
⁷ he will perish forever, like his own dung; You know, sidenote, I’d love to see that verse on a plaque in Hobby Lobby for living rooms.
those who have seen him will say, ‘Where is he?’
 - ii. He will suck the poison of serpents;
the fangs of an adder will kill him.
¹⁷ He will not enjoy the streams,
the rivers flowing with honey and cream.
¹⁸ What he toiled for he must give back uneaten;
he will not enjoy the profit from his trading.
¹⁹ For he has oppressed the poor and left them destitute;
he has seized houses he did not build.

- iii. OK, so just a basic problem here. Does this always happen to those who oppress the poor? Or do they sometimes get away with it and even prosper? Zophar is kinda partially right here. Sometimes your evil deeds haunt you. But some slimers just get away with it. This is why it is critical to read scripture in context – because in this case, there are things that are intentionally UNTRUE in order to set up the dialogue and get to the truth by the end of the text.

3) More of phase 2!

- a. Eliphaz-Job
- b. Bildad- Job
- c. I don't know why Zophar doesn't get his third shot... maybe Job was just annoyed with the hothead by now.

One of the most important things to note in this is that Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar never change. Their perspective is the same. They change the angle of their message, but it is the same thing for all eight rounds. Good people get good things. Bad people get bad things. It is poetry, so it is eloquent and flowery... but it always insinuates and sometimes downright accuses Job of doing something wrong because bad things happen to bad people. And if bad things happened to you... well, hello!

Job is different. Job has several learning arcs during this time. Job actually changes. Lets examine two of them.

Arc number one Who will be my mediator? has to do with the idea of a mediator. Here is Job's frustration. "I can't even plead my case to God. I am just the victim of this horrible circumstance and NOW I can't even talk to God."

- Last week I ordered a grill online and it DID NOT COME. I was so frustrated that I got online and filled out the form. Then I sent the email. Four days later they didn't get back to me. But there was NO customer service phone number. Totally impossible to troubleshoot. OH! If only I had a customer service rep!
- This is what Job was feeling. If only I had a customer service rep who could talk to the boss! But there is none out there.

There is no Mediator

Job 9:33-4 If only there were someone to mediate between us, someone to bring us together,

34 someone to remove God's rod from me, so that his terror would frighten me no more.

Job wants his day in court. He thinks – OK, the retribution principle is right, so there must just be bad information getting to the big decision maker. What I need is a mediator – someone to stand before God and stick up for me with good information. Then I would be vindicated and sent back to the land of affluence. Hmm... a mediator to stand before God, who is he yearning for? But he just doesn't exist...

I have a mediator in heaven

Job 16:19 Even now my witness is in heaven; my advocate is on high.

²⁰ My intercessor is my friend^[a] as my eyes pour out tears to God;

²¹ on behalf of a man he pleads with God as one pleads for a friend

OK, now he thinks there IS a mediator. There is someone interceding for him. I don't know where he gets it, but he has this cool confidence that there is a mediator in heaven. And I think his logic train is going off. IF God is good. And IF I am righteous, and IF I am subject to suffering without deserving it, there must be more to the picture. There must be another agent who is going to bat for me.

My mediator will stand on earth!

Job 19:25 I know that my redeemer[c] lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth.

Can you feel the confidence growing as time goes by. I KNOW that my redeemer lives! It is a sure thing. AND he will stand on the earth. Now, I don't think that Job knew about Jesus. He could not have been referring to the incarnation – Jesus becoming a human being. He was smart, but not like that. But even though Job did not know Jesus, Jesus knew Job. And he could drop these bombs into his mind and into his poetry for us to discover later. Isn't that cool? God had this plan all along – that there would be ONE who would take our messes and redeem them. Messes we perpetuated and messes that were foisted upon us. He is both sanctifier and healer. And ultimately he saves us from this planet and that is good news amen?

Arc 2: What happens post death?

Nothing. There is no life or justification or justice.

Job 7:8-9 The eye that now sees me will see me no longer; you will look for me, but I will be no more.

⁹ As a cloud vanishes and is gone, so one who goes down to the grave does not return. He will never come to his house again; his place will know him no more.

In chapter 7, you have a clear sense that you go to the grave and don't ever rise.

You die and you vanish. Rot in the ground. Buh-byeeee

14:7-12 "At least there is hope for a tree: If it is cut down, it will sprout again, and its new shoots will not fail.

⁸ Its roots may grow old in the ground and its stump die in the soil,

⁹ yet at the scent of water it will bud and put forth shoots like a plant.

¹⁰ But a man dies and is laid low; he breathes his last and is no more.

¹¹ As the water of a lake dries up or a riverbed becomes parched and dry,

¹² so he lies down and does not rise; till the heavens are no more, people will not awake or be roused from their sleep.

You die and never come back. It is not just nothing after death, but a confidence that nothing happens after,

Because... wait... if there WERE a resurrection, maybe... maybe some justice could take place.

Job 14:13-14

“If only you would hide me in the grave and conceal me till your anger has passed!

If only you would set me a time and then remember me!

¹⁴ If someone dies, will they live again? All the days of my hard service

I will wait for my renewal¹⁴ to come.

In 14, Job has an idea. How about putting me in the ground for a while... then boom, at the right time, raise me up to live again. I can be renewed and restored to a new life full of joy and power. And then...

Resurrection changes everything!

Job 19:26-27

And after my skin has been destroyed, yet[e] in[f] my flesh I will see God;

27 I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another.

How my heart yearns within me!

OK, if there is a resurrection, that is a game changer! By chapter 19, he has confidence that he will see God!

- Now, we don't know if this is resurrection post death language. Is “after my skin has been destroyed” – after his disease is done, or after his body has died... not sure. Is seeing God a euphemism for blessing after the curse is over, not sure. But we know he planned to see God himself with his own eyes and that his heart leapt with joy at the thought. You see, Job is breaking through the “this is the only experience of humanity” paradigm. If it is true that there is an afterlife, then there is more opportunity for justice – for the oppressor and the hurting. In fact, if this life is a puff of smoke and afterlife is eternal, then what happens THERE is far more important than what happens here. And if a redeemer is coming in the future, this can make all things right!
- What this solves
 - First, it solves the injustice around the problem of suffering. The scriptures readily admit that sometimes the evil prosper and sometimes the righteous go away empty handed. The scriptures understand that sometimes disease or bankruptcy or broken relationships hit people without mercy – and without correlation to ‘deserving it’. And sometimes, people die without this ever being resolved.
 - But if there is an afterlife, justice can take place there. The justice of God can be served on a cosmic scale and that which is wrong in this world can be made right.
 - Second, it solves the tension Job is experiencing with God and a mediator. As you read these passages in Job, he does not know the theology about Jesus – he doesn't know about how Jesus would die for our sins, or heal our disease, or connect us to God. But it just feels like he is yearning for it in a way that it is just outside of his grasp. Like he can smell it, but not put his arms around it.
 - Third, it begins to answer the question “Why didn't God do something about evil and suffering? Why doesn't he do something now? And When WILL he do something to end it once and for all?” And I say it begins to answer because it is only as the plan of God unfolds that this is all made clear.

Conclusion

God has, God is, God will do something about suffering. Job is just HINTING at what he could not have known. But we know it now. In fact, of all of the world views, Christianity has by far the most comprehensive, sensible and satisfying answer to the question of evil and suffering. Nobody else comes close.

- Jesus HAS done something about evil! He went to the cross to take our shame and our evil and our suffering on himself. He changed the eternal equation for all who trust him from eternal punishment for our sins to eternal rejoicing for his sacrifice on our behalf.
- Jesus IS doing something about evil! It is this group of redeemed people called the church who are the bringers of light and life and hope to a world gone wrong.
- Jesus WILL do something about evil once and for all! He is coming back and will crush evil into the ground and it will never rear its ugly head again. Job takes 26 chapters to get there, but we can go there, just by trusting in him.

PRAY