

Job 38:1–12 (CEB)

Then the LORD answered Job from
the whirlwind:

²Who is this darkening counsel
with words lacking knowledge?

³Prepare yourself like a man;
I will interrogate you,
and you will respond to me.

⁴Where were you
when I laid the earth's foundations?
Tell me if you know.

⁵Who set its measurements?
Surely you know.
Who stretched a measuring tape on it?

⁶On what were its footings sunk;
who laid its cornerstone,

⁷while the morning stars sang in
unison

and all the divine beings shouted?

⁸Who enclosed the Sea behind doors
when it burst forth from the womb,

⁹when I made the clouds its garment,
the dense clouds its wrap,

¹⁰when I imposed my limit for it,
put on a bar and doors

¹¹and said, "You may come this far,
no farther;

here your proud waves stop"?

¹²In your lifetime have you
commanded the morning,
informed the dawn of its place

Romans 8:31–39 (CEB)

³¹So what are we going to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³²He didn't spare his own Son but gave him up for us all. Won't he also freely give us all things with him?

³³Who will bring a charge against God's elect people? It is God who acquits them. ³⁴Who is going to convict them? It is Christ Jesus who died, even more, who was raised, and who also is at God's right side. It is Christ Jesus who also pleads our case for us.

³⁵Who will separate us from Christ's love? Will we be separated by trouble, or distress, or harassment, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ³⁶As it is written,
We are being put to death all day long for your sake.

We are treated like sheep for slaughter.

³⁷But in all these things we win a sweeping victory through the one who loved us. ³⁸I'm convinced that nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord: not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present things or future things, not powers ³⁹or height or depth, or any other thing that is created.

Acts 17:21–25 (CEB)

²¹They said this because all Athenians as well as the foreigners who live in Athens used to spend their time doing nothing but talking about or listening to the newest thing.)

²²Paul stood up in the middle of the council on Mars Hill and said, "People of Athens, I see that you are very religious in every way. ²³As I was walking through town and carefully observing your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: 'To an unknown God.' What you worship as unknown, I now proclaim to you. ²⁴God, who made the world and everything in it, is Lord of heaven and earth. He doesn't live in temples made with human hands. ²⁵Nor is God served by human hands, as though he needed something, since he is the one who gives life, breath, and everything else.

*There are so many questions that we will never fully answer - but we stand firm,
grounding our lives on our crucified and risen Lord.*

The British comedian and actor, Stephen Fry, has been getting some attention lately because of an interview he gave to Gay Byrne, an Irish tv host, in which Fry went on at great length about his ardently held atheist views. For Fry, because of the suffering in this world, God, if he were to exist, would be an immoral monster. Fry used some very colorful language that set his Roman Catholic interviewer back on his heels. You can watch the interview for yourself, if you like. But there is certainly nothing new about indicting God for the pain and suffering in this world, especially that which is not inflicted by humans. How could children get bone cancer in a world created by a good and powerful God? Surely God could have done it differently? Perhaps God is good, but powerless. Perhaps God is sufficiently powerful, but just not so good. Or perhaps there is no god at all.

None of this is new. I'm sure such questions have troubled you, as they have me. And there is much that we could say about these questions; Christians and Jews have wrestled with them for millennia. In fact, what may be the oldest piece of writing in the Bible is concerned solely with asking why bad things happen. Why is there pain and suffering in this world? Couldn't God have done better? So, it is worth returning to the book of Job.

Job

The "once upon a time" story of Job is simple. He lives in the land of Uz and is, by all accounts, a "blameless and upright" man, wealthy and devoted to God. Meanwhile, in the heavens, a member of God's divine council is charged with roaming the earth as a sort of prosecutor. Coming before God, the Accuser (*ha-satan* in the Hebrew) claims that Job is devoted to God only because he has been very blessed in his life and that if Job loses everything, then he will turn against God.

So God and the accuser make a bet. God allows the Accuser to take everything from Job – his family, his home, his wealth, even his health. Then they will find out whether Job is truly faithful to God or not.

The disasters that fall on Job are numerous and varied. Some of the suffering he endures is caused by marauders. But much of Job's suffering results from what we would call natural disasters; lightning, a wind storm, disease. Job loses everything as his family is killed in the disasters and raids and all of Job's property is destroyed.

Job has no idea why such suffering has fallen on him. Job's friends come to comfort him and for seven days they simply sit with him. That is very wise of them. But as the days go by, they can't resist trying to answer the questions posed by Job's suffering. Surely, Job has done something wrong. Or perhaps his family did. Somebody must have, they say . . . for bad things don't happen to good people.

But, of course, you and I know that they do. Bad things happen to good people all the time. Sometimes it is at the hands of other people, but sometimes it is the indiscriminate suffering caused by a tsunami or a tornado or an illness. Good people, though marred by sin, die prematurely all the time. And, sometimes, the most awful, miserable, hateful people live to a ripe old age.

In the end, after Job's friends have demonstrated their foolishness and pride through all their futile and incorrect explanations, God arrives and puts human wisdom in perspective.

"Are the bad things that happen to us punishment for sin?"

In the ancient world and for many people still, the bad things that happen to us are *necessarily* the result of something we've done, some sin we've committed. Certainly, this is how many of the Israelites understood the world to be. For most Jews, the prosperous were blessed by God and those who struggled or were struck by tragedy were reaping the consequences of their sin. In some Jewish communities, those who were lame could not be leaders for these very reasons.

But the book of Job is like a blaring trumpet reminding us that things are not that simple. Yes, sin has consequences, often tragic consequences. We are created to live in one manner but often choose to live in another. We can't be surprised that life often takes bad turns as a result of our own bad choices.

BUT . . . we cannot reverse the equation. Though sin leads to bad consequences, we can't conclude that suffering *necessarily* results from sin. Job suffered but he had not sinned. This is one of the main points of the book. Job doesn't know why he has suffered but he knows that he didn't bring it on himself.

SO . . . there is truth in the statement:

If you sin, then you will suffer.

But Job's friends reversed the statement:

If you suffer, then you have sinned.

That's wrong. The reversal is an error in reasoning and the book of Job is a powerful corrective against it.

The gist of what God has to say is this: this is God's world and Job's friends are foolish to think they can answer all the questions. They do not have the answers and they won't ever get them. In essence, Job, his friends, and all of us are finite and limited in our perspective, our knowledge, our understanding, and our power. God is not.

John Polkinghorne has long held the mantle of world's leading physicist/priest, excelling and renowned in both. Here's a bit of what he has to say about the nature of this world's design:

We tend to believe that if we had been in charge of creation we would have done it better. With a little more care about the details, we would have kept the beauty of sunset, but eliminated germs like staph. The more we understand the processes of the world, however, the less likely does it seem that this would be possible. The created order looks like a package deal. Exactly the same biochemical processes that enable cells to mutate, making evolution possible, are those that enable cells to become cancerous and generate tumors. You can't have one without the other. In other words the possibility of disease is not gratuitous; it's the necessary cost of life.¹

Sadly, we throw our accusations at God, failing to grasp that God has already received the worst from us.

Christ – crucified and resurrected

In the face of the unanswerable “Why?,” we have to choose where we stand. We'll never have all the answers we want, never know all that there is to know. For 2,000 years Christians have stood strong in the face of the darkness, standing on Jesus Christ and our sure knowledge of his resurrection. If the cross tells us anything, it tells us that God himself has already received the worst that this world has to offer. Bishop N. Thomas Wright put it this way:

“The Gospels thus tell the story, unique in the world's great literature, religious theories, and philosophies: the story of the creator God taking responsibility for what's happened to creation, bearing the weight of its problems on his own shoulders. As Sydney Carter put it in one of his finest songs, ‘It's God they ought to crucify, instead of you and me.’ Or, as one old evangelistic tract put it, the nations of the world got together to pronounce sentence on God for all the evils in the world, only to realize with a shock that God had already served his sentence. The tidal wave of evil crashed over the head of God himself. The spear went into his side like a plane crashing into a great building. God has been there. He has taken the weight of the world's evil on his own shoulders. This is not an explanation. It is not a philosophical conclusion. It is an event in which, as we gaze on in horror, we may perhaps glimpse God's presence in the deepest darkness of our world, God's strange unlooked-for victory over the evil of our world; and then, and only then, may glimpse also God's vocation to us to work with him on the new solution to the new problem of evil.”

Paul among the really smart people

Knowing all this, when the apostle Paul arrived in Athens on his second missionary journey (see Acts 16-18), he soon headed for the council of the Areopagus, a group of deep thinking Athenians that had once held a fair bit of power. So far as the Athenians in general, Luke writes, “Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new” (Acts 17:21). Deep-thinkers. Lots of them. Perhaps not too surprising given the rich heritage of Greek philosophy and culture. After all, this was the home of Plato and Aristotle and countless other philosophers.

The Athenians had their ideas about the nature of reality. What the world is. Who we are. The problem with the world. Even its solution. In other words, they had a worldview. Everyone does. And the Greeks embraced the idea that there is something larger than

¹From an NPR interview with John Polkinghorne in 2008 by Krista Tippit, “Quarks and Creation.” It is quoted in Fretheim's, *Creation Untamed*.

themselves, something unseen but quite real, whether it is Plato and Aristotle's first mover or the entertaining pantheon of Greek gods and goddesses.

When Paul rises to address these men, he talks to them in their language and quotes to them their own philosophers. He gets right to some of their deepest questions, such as the nature of being, so that he might talk to them about the God-Who-Is, the God who created all things, created humans in his image, and who provides everyone with being.

A treasured possession

The truth, Paul tells them, is that there is a god and not just any god, but God, the LORD God. And this God made the world and everything in it. He is near. Indeed, we couldn't get away from him if we tried. Ignore him, yes. Escape, no. Not even if you are the ever-clever Stephen Fry.

We are not the product of time and random mutation acting on some primordial soup. I'm not just my dog but with a bigger brain. Humans are unique among God's creatures, made in God's image. And some, though sadly not all, are God's family, set apart for a purpose. We are to be a holy people. All this, of course, ought to humble us; too often, it makes us prideful and arrogant. We forget our responsibilities; we behave in quite unholy ways. But still, there is a God who has revealed to us who we really are.

But is it true?

How do we know that the claims we make are true? Because, as Paul said to the Athenians, *God resurrected Jesus of Nazareth*. Christianity stands or falls on the truthfulness of that claim.

There is only one reason to be a Christian - because you believe that the Christian claims are true. Not because you need help with some aspect of your life or because you want to belong to something. Certainly, becoming a Christian will change the course of your life and help you cope with life's travails. Becoming a Christian will widen your circle of friends and make you part of a worldwide community. But those are consequences of belief, not reasons to believe. If, in the end, you believe that Jesus is largely a mythological figure or simply a very wise person who showed us a better way to live -- then don't bother. No one wants to build their lives on a myth and there is certainly no shortage of wise teachers and self-help books.

But we Christians stand with Christ no matter what, knowing that nothing – but nothing – neither sword nor words can separate from the love of the good and just God who made all that there is and yet was willing to give up his son for our sake.

Christ No Matter What!!!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. You might begin by talking about Job. He has suffered terribly, losing everything – all for no apparent reason. Assume that you are one of Job's friends. You've come to comfort him and the conversation inevitably turns to the explanation for Job's sufferings. What possible explanations might you suggest? What explanations might you hear from others? What is your reaction to God's pronouncements that the answers are unknowable and that it is foolish for us even to ask?
2. What do you think is God's role in the world's evil and suffering? Share some things you've heard people say about God when confronted by tragedy, such as "this is all part of God's plan." How do these statements make you feel about God?
3. Discuss the phrase, "Christ No Matter What." What does it mean to you? How would you make it concrete in your life? How would you proclaim it to others? You might share some times when your faith has gotten you through troubles and tribulations. Did you feel separated from God? Were you?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday Genesis 1:1-2:3 God creates the world and creates it good. See esp. verse 1:28. The humans are going to have to tame the earth!</p>	<p>Tuesday Job 3 Job curses the day he is born and expresses some of our own feelings in the face of suffering and evil.</p>
<p>Wednesday Psalm 23 Yes, God is with us in the darkest times.</p>	<p>Thursday Romans 8:18-39 Paul's entire passage on our suffering and our hope.</p>
<p>Friday 1 Corinthians 15:1-28 We can't come to these passages too often. Yes, Jesus was resurrected and nothing can be the same.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

