

Is God Punishing Me?

DAVE BAST

Why do bad things happen to good people? That is the age-old question that forms the backdrop to the book of Job. It is one way of raising the problem created by so much seemingly innocent suffering in a world supposedly ruled by a good, loving, almighty Father. Plenty of people, from philosophers to theologians to preachers to everyday folks, have offered explanations. We will dig into scripture today to look at some of their answers on *Groundwork*. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and Scott, today we are moving on to the second program in a series on the book of Job, that really we hope we can wrestle with you, the listener, with the problem of why bad things happen to us—why we suffer, when God is good, as we know, and God is great and powerful, it is that age-old problem: Why does he allow the things that happen to us?

SCOTT HOEZEE

This program and the next one are really going to wrestle with a lot of the answers people give...literally, answers people give, because some friends of Job are going to show up shortly, and we are going to think about what they had to say to Job, in this program, and again in program three of this series; but just to recap, unbeknownst to Job, behind the scenes in some very curious heavenly throne room scene, God and the accuser, as the name Satan in Hebrew means...God and the accuser kind of make a bet...they make a wager that God thinks that Job worships him just out of pure love and devotion. Satan thinks he does it only because God does nice things for him. So, take away all of the nice things, God, and he will curse you.

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, in two steps God gives Satan permission to do that; and so, first Satan strips Job of his family and all of his wealth. Well, Job is still believing in God. So then Satan says: Well, okay, fine. What about touching him? And God says: You cannot kill him, but okay, you can afflict him. So then Job loses his health and is afflicted with pain and sores and misery. His own wife tells him: Curse God and die; and he says: You are being foolish; no, God gives, God takes away; I am going to keep worshipping God. I do not understand this; and then he laments. In Job 3, he offers a very heartfelt lament, where he says: I wish I had never even been born; but he is still saying that to the God he believes in, so he does not accuse God of wrongdoing and he does not give up on the idea that there is a God; but, at the end of Job 3, he is in absolute misery. He is what everybody hopes never to become, an absolutely destitute man.

DAVE BAST

But he does not lose his faith, which is an amazing and profound truth...he does not lose his faith. So really, as we move further into the story, we will see that what he really wants is some answers from God. He really

wants to be able to confront God, to see God face to face, and get some explanation for what has been going on; and as we know...the reader...it is a little more complicated than just, well, God is in charge. God does whatever he wants, and so on and so forth. There is an evil enemy. God seems to permit him a certain amount of rope, you know, with which to hang us; and so, that is the story, and that is where we are headed; but meanwhile, some people show up, and what could be more important when you are suffering...when you are experiencing misery, feeling down, than for human companionship...human friendship?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and so we read this near the end of Job 2, before, actually, Job offers his lament, which we heard from Job 3.

2:11¹¹When Job's three friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite, heard about all the troubles that had come upon Job, they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go sympathize with him and comfort him. ¹²And when they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him. They began to weep aloud. They tore their robes; they sprinkled dust on their heads; ¹³then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him because they saw how great his suffering was.

DAVE BAST

Yes; so there they are, the three friends of Job—would-be comforters. Whenever I read this passage, I think of a great scene in Jane Austen's novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, where the family has gotten into a tragic situation—a sorrowful situation—and this clergyman, Mr. Collins, who is related to them, who is a real jerk, comes up and shows at the door and says: I have come to condole with you...I have come to condole. So, these friends...they are not going to prove to be very comforting to Job, but at least maybe we could say they have the right idea.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, they sit with Job for an entire week. They themselves are so overwhelmed with what he has lost that at first they actually honestly do not what to say. Their hearts are in their throats. They are crying. Of course they are; that is appropriate. So, they sit in utter silence for a week, and we are going to see very soon that that was them at their most useful. That was the best thing they did, because as we are going to see in just a few moments, once they start to talk, things take a turn.

DAVE BAST

Right, yes; that is when everything goes left, but here is the point, I think. I happened to go to a seminary commencement a few weeks ago, and the president of the seminary, who is a good friend, wanted to give a charge to the graduates. Okay, so these are now newly minted MDIV students, and they are, most of them, heading for the pastorate in some role or capacity, and as he charged them, he said simply this: I urge you to move toward the pain in peoples' lives; move toward the pain in the world; and I thought, yes, that is powerful advice for any pastor, for any Christian for that matter. If we move toward the pain, God can use us to bring comfort; but it is hard to do, isn't it?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; we would just as soon not do it; and even as a pastor, I know that there were times when I had to walk into the funeral parlor for a particularly tragic death, or when I had to walk into a hospital room where the odds were really good the person in the bed was going to die while I was there, and I remember standing outside the funeral home...standing outside the hospital room, and really having to take a deep breath and just sort of steel myself and walk in, because I would just as soon not.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But Job's friends move to the pain here; and good for them for doing it; it is not going to turn out great, but they have the right idea.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and the first rule in trying to be a comfort to another person...trying to be especially an agent of the Gospel—of the Good News—is show up—just show up. So, they show up, but in just a moment we will listen to what they have to say, and that is much less helpful.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and this second episode in a five-part series looking at the book of Job; and looking at, particularly, those questions that, for people of faith, are very pastorally acute questions: Why, God, why? Where is God when it hurts? If God loves me, why am I hurting so badly? Why didn't he prevent this? And of course, it is an age-old question, Dave; and of course, none of us know how many bad things God *did* prevent from happening to us. Probably, he does that a lot, but you cannot talk about what didn't happen.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The accident that didn't happen, you don't know about; only God knows about it. So, we are protected; we are hedged in; we are blessed, but not always; and some of the bad things that we fear most do happen, and they sure did to Job; and when that happens, the Church shows up, hopefully; the family shows up; and in this case, friends show up. Three friends have come, and they spend a week just sitting with Job, saying nothing; they just cry with him, and that is a lovely thing.

DAVE BAST

Yes; that is a lovely thing, but now we are going to go on and see what they start to say; and what they try to do is explain things to him; and we have to keep coming back and grounding ourselves in the main fact or truth of the story, and that is that Job is a righteous person. That is how he is introduced at the outset of the book, in the very first verse. Job is blameless and upright; one who feared God and turned away from evil, and even God says that about him. God kind of brags on Job: See how upright he is; and yet, all these terrible things happen; and there comes the problem, because, frankly, Scott, we don't worry so much when bad things happen to *bad* people, because we kind of figure they've got it coming, right?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; I mean, yes, we just live with the assumption that good people should get good things, bad people should get bad things; but there are two scenarios that happen all the time that do bother us. We are somewhat bothered when good things happen to bad people...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You might still think, yeah, well okay, so he cheated and he still made a million bucks on the deal, but you know, he will probably still get his eventually; but the flip of that is when bad things happen to genuinely good people, who we just know did not deserve this. This is a saintly pillar of the church, and oh, my goodness. Her husband and kids all died in a car accident. We know she did not deserve this. Why?

DAVE BAST

So, essentially the argument of the friends as we see it unfold is that bad things do not really happen to good people because you get what you deserve, and if things are out of balance right now, just wait. It will all be sorted out in the end. So, here is the first speech of Job's friend, Eliphaz, from Job Chapter 4. Eliphaz says: ⁷"Consider now, who being innocent, has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed? ⁸As I have observed, those who plow evil and those who sow trouble reap it. ⁹At the breath of God, they perish. At the blast of his anger, they are no more. Straight forward, right?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, right; there is the kind of...you just want to say, well, there now, that was easy.

DAVE BAST

Yes, the innocent never perish; the evil always do.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, what is starting here, and this is going to be a dynamic that is going to stretch on... So, this is Job 4. These arguments are going to go all the way through Job 31...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I mean, this is going to go...well, no; even farther than that, I think, to Job 37. So, huge, huge chunk of this book is going to be back-and-forth between Job and these three friends, and then a fourth one, who will show up later; and basically they are arguing backwards. They are saying: Here is the structure of the universe. The innocent never have a bad day. So, we can deduct from that...they are kind of using logic...if you suffer, you were not innocent to begin with, because do not mess with my worldview; and that is essentially what they are saying: Job, you have told us you are innocent; you have told us you do not deserve this; but well, look what happened to you. Fess up; what did you do?

DAVE BAST

[0:11:53.5] Yes, exactly; there is also...they kind of riff on this with a parallel suggestion or argument, and that is that maybe God is disciplining you; maybe you are okay...basically, you are okay, you are innocent, but you have done something. You have gone astray in some way; so God is correcting you, and he is using suffering to kind of bring you back.

So, in Job 5, Eliphaz goes on with his argument:

¹⁷"Blessed is the one whom God corrects; so do not despise the discipline of the Almighty; ¹⁸for he wounds, but he also binds up. He injures, but his hands also heal. ¹⁹From six calamities he will rescue you. In seven no harm will touch you. ^{24a}You will know that your tent is secure. ^{25a}You will know that your children will be many. ²⁶You will come to the grave in full vigor like sheaves gathered in season. ²⁷We have examined this, and it is true."

SCOTT HOEZEE

I like that last line. Hey, we took a look at this, Job, and there it is; so, what have you got to say? And Bildad...another friend...Bildad comes in a little bit later, in Chapter 8...in Job 8:

³"Does God pervert justice? Does the Almighty pervert what is right? ⁵But if you will seek God earnestly and plead with the Almighty, ⁶if you are pure and upright, even now he will rouse himself on your behalf and restore you to your prosperous state."

So again, confess and see if God comes back to you; and you know, best case scenario...okay, you did something bad, God had to give you a spanking—he had to discipline you; you know, and it is sort of like what parents sometimes say to their kids if they give them a little swat on the butt: This hurts me more than it

does you, but it is for your own good. And they are kind of saying, best case scenario, he is disciplining you and you are going to come out stronger; but, bottom line for Eliphaz and Bildad so far, you did do something wrong. Let's talk about it; confess it to God, and then maybe God will come back and restore you.

DAVE BAST

Yes; here is the great and striking thing about all of the friends' speeches in Job; the striking thing is how orthodox they are...

SCOTT HOEZEE

They sure sound like it.

DAVE BAST

They...I mean, this is all Bible truth, you know? God is righteous. God always does what is right. Listen to Psalm 145:

¹⁷The Lord is righteous in all his ways and faithful in all he does. ¹⁸The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. ¹⁹He fulfills the desires of those who fear him. He hears their cry and saves them. ²⁰The Lord watches over all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy.

I mean, when we read it in the Psalms we think, yes, man, that is great. When we read it in Job from the mouths of his would-be comforters, we think: Whoa, wait a minute, there could be something wrong about this.

SCOTT HOEZEE

They are also right in terms of saying that biblically there is this idea that sometimes God disciplines us, and he tries to straighten us up a little bit, and build some character in us, you know. I mean, you've got Hebrews 12, which quotes Proverbs 3:

⁵My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when the Lord rebukes you; ⁶because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his child.

So again, biblically they have this stuff on their side, but what is interesting, Dave...and we will loop back to this, and we noted this in the first program in this series...we readers know something Job and his friends do not know. This was not God's idea. This was not something God cooked up and sent to Job; this was, bizarrely enough in the set-up of Job, a wager...a test from Satan the accuser. So, there is more going on behind the scenes than Job knows, but there is way more going on behind the scenes than the friends know, too. They are orthodox, and wrong.

DAVE BAST

And Job, in the face of all of these good-sounding arguments, and sort of biblical, pious truths being spoken by his friends, Job just keeps on saying: No; no; no; I haven't done anything! I am innocent. Which is not to say he is sinless or perfect...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

But it is to say he is convinced of his own integrity...his own uprightness. There must be something more here; something that I do not understand; something that is not so pat and so clear and so easy as you think; and yes, it is true, all that you say. God disciplines his children, and the Lord is good, and what he does is right. You are going to reap what you sow; I mean, Paul says that in Galatians 6.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Job is right; and here is how we readers know he is right. God said it to Satan at the beginning: Look at my servant Job...

DAVE BAST

Right, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

There is nobody as righteous as this guy.

DAVE BAST

That is a key point.

SCOTT HOEZEE

God knew it; and so, when Job keeps saying: I am righteous; I don't deserve this. I mean, you can see why his friends would say: Yeah, right; but God said it.

DAVE BAST

Yes; so, what is the take-away for us, that is the question; and does this have something to say to us, perhaps, when we are attempting to be comforters to a friend who is in trouble? That is what we want to conclude our program with in just a moment.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and as we look at the counsel and the advice and the sentiments of Job's three friends, his would-be comforters, we come away thinking as truthful as many of their statements are, there is something not quite right about them...not quite appropriate. They do not know what is going on exactly in Job's life; and the basic point seems to be that they may be saying the right things, but at the wrong time and in the wrong way.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; yes, as we noted just a few moments ago, they are really good examples of how you can be perfectly orthodox and still wrong in terms of how you apply your orthodoxy. It is also interesting to notice, though, Dave, that...so, here in Job we have three friends...soon four...who will accuse Job: Bad things happen because you were bad; but you know, I have met people, and you have too, and as pastors we have counseled with people who accuse themselves of this. They cannot figure it out, but they say: Look, I know God sent this to me for a reason. I am sure it is because of my sinfulness. I am being punished somehow. I remember my colleague, John Cooper, who taught apologetics and philosophical theology at Calvin Seminary for many years, always pointing out to people the Bible teaches us that the punishment for our sins was laid on Jesus. God does not punish us for our sin anymore, so that is something we need to point out to ourselves and to each other.

DAVE BAST

Yes, great old John Newton once said he may give us a cup that we have to drain...a bitter cup...but it is not penal...it is not punishment because Jesus drank that for us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So anyway, sometimes our friends try to comfort us by saying: Well, you must have deserved this somehow; which is not a very nice thing to say, but again, they have orthodoxy on their side; but sometimes we say it to ourselves, and it is not necessarily true. You know, there are places in the Bible, Dave, where...even in the New Testament and even with Jesus...where people try to connect the dots. They see a bad outcome and so they reason backwards to say, well, what brought that about? It must have been a bad event, and one of those in Luke 13.

DAVE BAST

Right; it is a great illustration where Jesus...it is basically, I think, Jesus' take on the story of Job. ¹So, some were present at time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. ²Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? ³I tell you no; but unless you repent, you too will all perish. ⁴Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them. Do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? ⁵I tell you, no; but unless you repent, you too will all perish."

So, it is Jesus' take on a couple of the tragedies of his day.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and it reminds me of another passage in John 9, where Jesus and the disciples encounter a man born blind, and in that day a lot of people assumed that that was almost like a curse, you get born blind; and so the disciples asked what people always asked in that day: Lord, who sinned, this guy or his parents, that he was born that way? And Jesus says neither. This situation is here. You are going to be able to see the glory of God through it, but your attempt to connect the dots is just wrong. But we always do that, and I have a feeling I may have mentioned this once before in another *Groundwork* program in a different connection, but years ago when there was this very...back in 1989 or so, there was a devastating earthquake in San Francisco, and there were a lot of Christians in the church who wanted to connect this with punishment, maybe for having such a big gay population or being, you know...sinful lifestyles and so God punished them with the earthquake. Rich Mouw, who was president of the Fuller Seminary at the time, was invited to preach at a church where they clearly wanted a sermon on the Sunday after the earthquake where he was going to say something like that, but he was not going to play that game; so for his text he chose the line from Elijah at Mount Horeb: God was not in the earthquake.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Do not try to connect the dots, Jesus says, because whenever people do in the Bible, they almost always get it wrong.

DAVE BAST

Yes, but he draws a different but interesting lesson from this, doesn't he? It seems to be about the precariousness of life, and how fragile we all are, and how we need to keep close to the Lord. Never mind thinking those people were sinners. You know, this would have been good advice for Eliphaz and Bildad and the other guy, Zophar...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

If they could have heard Jesus say to them: Don't think that Job is more evil because he suffered; no, I tell you; it doesn't work that way; but unless you repent, you will perish. Look at yourself; and you want to go assigning blame to people for what happens to them; be careful; do not go there, but instead, you turn to the Lord.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and we do not want to get ahead of ourselves, but near the end of our next program in this series we are going to find out that, guess what? Bildad and Eliphaz and Zophar *are* asked to confess *their* sins and make atonement for the bad things they end up saying. But right, that is sort of the idea that there is always more going on than we know. Do not be simplistic in trying to retroactively connect dots to who did what wrong to result in this bad situation. It is not that simple. It is just not that simple, Jesus says. And anyway, you know,

kind of mind your own business and take care of yourself. We are all in the same situation. We all serve God. We all have problems, and we just have to, you know, yield ourselves to God and to his grace and to his care and to his forgiveness.

DAVE BAST

You know, there is a wonderful thing that can come out of this, I think, for all of us as we think about the Gospel message and Christ taking our punishment upon himself. We know that at the cross he really, in a literal sense, died in our place; so there is no more punishment for us. You do not get what you deserve. I do not get what I deserve. Instead of punishment, I get grace, and that is the good news of the Gospel.

So, as we sit with people...as we go to them, as we said at the outset, we move toward the pain, we become ambassadors of the Good News...we become little Christs in the place of Jesus, attempting to bring our comfort. The best thing is just to be there, to sit, to be silent, to be patient. Do not try to explain. Do not try to give reasons. Do not try to cheer people up and make them feel better. Just be with them in solidarity and love. Pray with them. God will use that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Thanks be to God that he does. Well, thank you for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Dave Bast, and we hope you will join us again next time as we continue studying the story of Job to gain a better understanding of balancing love and truth as we console our friends who are in suffering.

Connect with us at our website, groundworkonline.com, and tell us scripture passages and topics you would like to hear discussed on future *Groundwork* programs.

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