

“A Moral Universe?”

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This month, we are going to be spending every Sunday hearing selections from the Book of Job. We're following the lectionary, which rarely provides a chance to hear an entire story from the Hebrew scriptures. Usually, the Hebrew scripture passages are just footnotes to the Gospel readings. But this month is different. Today's reading is from the beginning, when God and the angel Satan make a bet in heaven. Will Job lose faith in God, even if all his wealth is taken away?

In this week's reading, Satan returns to heaven for a second time, after destroying Job's wealth and children. God says, see, Job is still faithful to me even though he's lost all his flocks, camels and children. Satan says the only reason he is still faithful is because he still has his health. Take that away and he'll curse you. God says ok, go take away his health, but not his life. So, Satan returns and covers him in painful boils, so that he feels miserable, and he looks disfigured. His wife tells him to curse God for this terrible misfortune. But Job stands fast in his faith.

The Book of Job is famous because it starts with such an outlandish premise. Does God really make bets in heaven? We hope that is impossible, but it sure gets our attention. The setup for the story has the sound of a folk tale or a joke, like three men walk into a bar, or once upon a time, God made a bet with Satan. We don't need to take the bet part too seriously. But the story does pose a very serious question about the fate of good people. The one thing we know for sure in the story is that Job is innocent and righteous. He has done nothing wrong to deserve any of these disasters. So, the story poses a stark question: does God cause innocent people to suffer?

Right after today's reading, three friends show up. They will insist that Job must have done something wrong to deserve all this misfortune. They say that is not misfortune at all, but punishment. But we know that Job has done nothing wrong. So why is he suffering?

People often assume that religion teaches that we live in a moral universe. That if bad things happen to people, it is a punishment or a test from God. The flipside of that is that when good things happen to people, it is a reward from God. This view of religion was very popular in Job's Day, some 2500 years ago. And it still is. You may have heard of the Prosperity Gospel. This is the idea that if you are faithful enough to God, then you will be rewarded with a good job, a good relationship, and lots of money. Evangelical churches often embrace this idea. If you show your loyalty to God by giving the church a lot of money, your luck will turn around. You will get that promotion, find that potential wife or husband you have been praying for. The ministers of these churches show off their wealth with fancy cars and private airplanes, all funded by their congregants. Every once in a while, they show up in the news, found guilty of tax fraud and other crimes. They wear fancy clothes, five thousand dollar running shoes. They drive very expensive cars to show their congregants what is possible when one is faithful to God. (For the record, I bike to work and ride the TTC a lot.)

These churches are based on the idea that we live in a moral universe. God confers wealth on the faithful as a reward. But in a moral universe, this implies that if you are poor, then your faith must be weak. You are not faithful enough to God, that is why you have not been rewarded with wealth. This is a cruel way to treat people whose economic circumstances have nothing to do with their faith. We know from the gospels that Jesus loves the poor, there is no shame in being poor. If anything, Jesus has reservations about the rich. They may have a hard time getting into heaven because they often worship themselves and wealth, not God. At no point does Jesus ever say that wealth is a sign of God's favour. The Prosperity Gospel is terrible theology, it is a religion of its own, not really Christian at all. But is consistent with the idea that we live in a moral universe, where God rewards the faithful.

This idea that God intervenes to help the faithful is not just found in prosperity gospel churches. A few months ago, a sniper almost killed Donald Trump. He moved out of the way at the last minute, so a bullet grazed his ear. He narrowly avoided being killed. In the United States, many Christians have concluded that God saved Trump^[1].



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Supporters Believe 'Hand of God' Saved Trump

Lawmakers, influencers, and religious leaders are all portraying Donald Trump surviving an assassination attempt as part of God's plan to protect him and deliver a Christian America.

They argue that he came so close to losing his life that the only explanation is that God saved Trump so he could be elected President. This view relies on the idea that we live in a moral universe, where God rewards the faithful with protection.

But there are big problems with this idea. The first problem is that the bullets that missed Trump killed a man nearby, Corey Comperatore. He covered his family with his body to keep them safe. Was he being punished by God? By all accounts, he was a stand-up guy: a volunteer firefighter and army reservist, a good family man.^[2] If Trump was saved, was Corey punished by God? And if God wanted to punish this man, why not give him a heart attack in his sleep, rather than die in front of his family? How is that just or fair? So, God saves Trump, the man who is officially guilty of sexual assault, but kills the family man? It makes no sense.

But if we conclude that God had no hand in saving Trump, how do we explain this event? Why did it happen this way? The fact is, hundreds of details had to come together for Trump to be at that rally, for that bullet to be fired, and for it to miss. There had to be someone who wanted to shoot Trump. But intent alone isn't enough. There had to be a building nearby to shoot from. The local police and the Secret Service had to make mistakes so that the shooter could get up there^[3]. Trump's people had to decide to hold a rally on that day, in a place close to the teenage shooter's home.^[4] And the teenager needed access to a high-powered rifle. His father sold it to him. And finally, Trump had to move at the last minute – did he get pushed a bit by the wind, caused by weather forces a thousand kilometers away? Did he see a sign in the crowd that he liked, or a pretty woman? There are so many variables in this kind of event, so many things that had to go wrong and go right, that not even a supercomputer could sort out exactly why it went down the way it did at that moment.

We may never know why Trump wasn't killed that day. It's too complicated. God may know, but God isn't telling.

And that's what this part of the Book of Job is trying to tell us. Job has no way of knowing why all these terrible things have happened to him. He has no idea about the bet in heaven that destroyed his wealth, his children, and his health. And he never finds out. God never tells him about the bet. Job is like all of us, the victim of events that bear no explanation, no calling card from God to explain why they happened. They just happen. Imagining that God killed your niece with cancer to teach you a lesson is not a good way to understand your life. People who say everything happens for a reason are peddling a cheap and terrible theology. It implies that people who suffer deserve to suffer, that God wants them to teach them a lesson.

But let's remember that we are Christians. At no time does Jesus ever say that God punishes people, and that is why they are poor or sick. At no time does Jesus say a person was born blind to teach them or their parents a lesson. Jesus makes fun of that idea in the Gospel of John (John 9:1-3). Instead, Jesus joins us as a human being in the mess of a life that doesn't come with neat explanations. He spends his time with lepers and the sick, helping when He can. He does not blame them for their illnesses or present them as punishments. He says everyone sins, the poor, the sick, the healthy and the rich. Sin does not create sickness. The poor are not God's victims.

Instead, Jesus says that even when we suffer in life, God is with us in our suffering. And God makes this point not just in words, but in actions. Jesus knew that the authorities wanted to kill him. He could have escaped from Jerusalem, walked off to another country, become anonymous. But he didn't. He allowed himself to be arrested, whipped and crucified to show us that God is with us, even when we suffer. Even when we are sick from chemo and cancer, God is with us. Your cancer is not a punishment from God. You can have a solid faith and still suffer, still be poor. God does not cause that kind of misfortune. Instead, God is with us all, in any suffering we experience. God on the cross says, I get it. I get suffering, I am suffering with you, and this is not a punishment from God.

When Job suffers, his wife tells him to renounce God. Job replies, should I only love God when I am given good things? I will love God even when bad things happen to me. It is all God's world, and I must take it all. As Christians, we can agree with Job, but we don't have to be fully satisfied with his answer. Jesus calls us to work with God to reduce the suffering of the world. To help the poor escape poverty. To help the homeless get homes. To stop senseless, devastating wars. We know that so much of society's suffering is not random

but designed and tolerated by human beings. Like Job, we should not curse God for misfortune. Instead, like Christ, we should work with God to share the love God has given us, so all may live good lives.

Amen.