

## “QUESTIONING GOD”

Job 30:20-26 (p. 515)

John 3:16-17 (p. 1030)

Many of the great figures of faith in the Old Testament were quite adept at complaining to God. Moses, for example, complained that God had given him a job to do but had failed to give him the necessary skills to do it properly. Jeremiah complained that God had called him, even before he was born, to be a prophet. But when he grew up to his vocation he was mocked and treated like a fool. So he complained to God, *“Is that any way to treat your servant?”*

Job, of course, is the Bible’s prime case of bad things happening to good people. Of all people, Job had ample reason to complain, and he did – eloquently. Today’s lesson from Job is one painful example of his understandable complaints to God. Throughout Scripture you will find people of deep faith who nevertheless questioned God, who sometimes even railed at him. To me, the fact that their complaints are included in God’s Word is terribly important. What it means is that some of those battles of faith were fought not just for themselves, but for you and me as well. We would be wise, therefore, to learn what we can from their struggles, so that we might be spared lodging some of those complaints which God has, in fact, already redressed.

I’ll mention three complaints that we find cropping up in the Old Testament. The complaints are easily recognized because they are based on expectations most of us probably entertain. After we look at those three complaints, we’ll hear what the gospel has to say in response.

1. The first complaint is this: ***“I think good people should expect preferential treatment from God.”*** After all, what good is it to have friends in high places if you can’t count on them to protect your special interests? You will hear that same sentiment expressed on occasion by people facing medical treatment. *“I’m not worried,”* they’ll say. *“God won’t let it be cancer. After all, I have faith.”* You can hear that same expectation of preferential treatment in the words of the psalmist. In Psalm 91 he says: *“A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you.”*

Really? Some people might find that notion slightly obscene – that God would play favorites. Imagine the battle scene described by the psalmist. Think of yourself surrounded by 11,000 fellow soldiers either killed or maimed. And there you stand unscathed, being told, *“Well of course you made it! After all, what can you expect? You’re one of God’s favorites.”* Is that why you survived, because God answered your prayers and ignored those of the others, because God preferred

you to them? Is it acceptable for God to allow others to be sent to the cancer ward but not you, because you're one of God's faithful favorites? Tell that to Job. As a matter of fact, the book of Job is the Bible's inspired and compelling denial of just that sort of thinking.

Think for a moment about all the good, godly people for whom the prognosis confirmed their worst fears. They loved God too. Goodness had followed them all the days of their life, but suddenly it was different. Like Job, they could say, "*Yet when I hoped for good, evil came.*" They may lose someone dear, or they're worried about their children, or they lose their job, or their marriage goes sour. It's easy to have faith when the going is easy. But what about the other times?

In the face of all this, seeing that bad things do happen to good people, our Old Testament saint was willing to concede that virtue does not guarantee our safety. Despite his complaining that it ought to be otherwise, he had to admit that great faith doesn't automatically insure great security. You and I have to come to terms with that fact as well. So, our Old Testament complainer modified his expectations in light of the evidence. But in lowering his sights to a more reasonable level, he came up with a second complaint I'm sure we will all recognize.

2. The second complaint goes like this: "*If God's people can't expect preferential treatment, I think that life should be perfectly fair – God should reward good people with health and prosperity, and he should plague evil people with swift and appropriate punishment.*" Notice the expectation behind that thinking. The idea is that it is not unreasonable to expect God to give folks what they deserve. After all, isn't that justice – pure and simple? And don't we all believe in justice?

Well, it didn't take much looking around before our Old Testament saint found ample reason to complain. He noted that God was in the habit of making his sun rise on the good and bad alike, sending his rain on both the just and the unjust. In fact, God seemed to be rather indifferent to our idea of justice. He is evidently not nearly as eager as we are to reward the good people and punish the bad ones.

You can appreciate that complaint, can't you? Sometimes life doesn't live up to our standards of fairness. "*I don't want any special treatment,*" you might say. "*I just want God to reward me if I'm good, and if I'm bad I should expect to suffer the consequences. And that should be true for everyone. I just think that life ought to be fair.*" But life isn't always fair, is it? In fact, that is probably one of the most well-worn answers given by parents to the complaints lodged by their irate children: "*Well I'm sorry, dear, but life isn't always fair.*"

But even though we know it's true that life isn't always fair, it still upsets us. Perhaps it is because we know that life isn't always fair, and we know that

sometimes there's not a thing we can do about it – maybe it is because of that frustration that our Old Testament saint registers his third and bitterest complaint.

3. It goes like this: *“Maybe I shouldn't expect preferential treatment. And maybe life isn't always fair. But God, when I see you not only letting the wicked off without punishment, but actually letting them prosper, that just adds insult to injury. I want to register my extreme displeasure that they are the ones who get the breaks, while good honest people always seem to be fighting an uphill battle.”*

Read the complaint lodged in Psalm 73. Better yet, I'll read it to you. The author says: *“I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from the burdens common to man... This is what the wicked are like – always carefree, they increase in wealth. Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence.”* Folks, those are fighting words. That is the complaint of a man who feels not only injured but insulted.

*“What am I good for – nothing? God, I can handle personal setbacks, even undeserved disappointments. But what galls me is that some people (we both know) are rotten to the core. And yet you let them get away with murder. God, that hurts!”* Do you ever feel like talking that way to God? You might accuse the psalmist of overstating his case. He may have looked at a few extreme examples and drawn a too-hasty conclusion. But he has a valid point. Wickedness does have an unfair advantage over goodness. An unscrupulous liar does have a competitive edge on the person of high principle.

And what do we do when we see that sort of thing happening? Either we become irate like the psalmist, complaining about insult added to injury. Or, as likely as not, we shrug our shoulders and say, *“Hey, that's the way of the world. What can you do?”* Well, as Christians, our Lord tells us that while that is the way of the world, we still have to be vigilant and to call those deceivers on their deceit. Jesus put it this way. He told us to be “street smart” – to be as harmless as doves but as sharp as serpents. It may not remove the reason for that third complaint. But it just might help.

Well, there you have three common complaints brought to God. As I said earlier, many great people of faith have wrestled with those issues in the past. Hopefully we can learn from their stories – at least learn that we're not the only ones who've struggled with those feelings. But I also want to remind you of what God has to say in response to those complaints. So in these last moments, let's see how the gospel of God's great love for us has already redressed those grievances.

If I'm reading it correctly, the gospel takes those complaints and turns them upside-down. Look at it this way. The unspoken assumption behind those three complaints is that if God loved us enough, he would give us the kind of world we want. But the Gospel turns that assumption upside down and says that God loves

us too much to give us the kind of world we want. In fact, there is a sense in which some of the things we complain about are the best evidence of how much God really loves us.

**A.** For example, we complain that, since we've given him our all, God ought to give preferential treatment to his own. The gospel, however, says that God's love is indiscriminate. He doesn't play favorites. And thank God he doesn't. Consider this. If God did play favorites (if he loved you and ignored others, or if he loved someone else but couldn't care less about you) what would that do to your respect for him? Would his playing favorites increase or diminish God's capacity to love? Would it open his arms – or tie his hands?

When you think about it, God's indiscriminate love is the best sort of evidence that every one of us is precious to him. He doesn't even love us equally. He goes one better and loves us uniquely. Because no two of his children are the same, he simply will not equate or even compare his love for any of us with anyone else.

God doesn't play favorites. And there is something deep inside us that is repulsed at the idea of being able to bribe God, to coerce him into giving favors. William James would say that there is something small and despicable about those who "lobby for special favors in the courts of the Almighty." Thank God, he won't allow it. God is too great and too good and too wise and too loving for that kind of playing favorites.

**B.** Or take the complaint that life ought to be fair. We'll say, "*If God ran things properly, good people would prosper and bad ones would be cursed.*" Right? Thank God the gospel doesn't see it that way – and for some rather compelling reasons. In the first place, if you could count on goodness always being rewarded and evil always being punished, you wouldn't be able to distinguish between goodness and selfishness. Some people would be good precisely for what they could get out of it.

In Sir Robert Bolt's play, *A Man for All Seasons*, Thomas More's daughter, Meg, complains. She says that good people like her father are abused when they deserve to be honored. It's that old "it isn't fair" line. Listen to Thomas More's memorable reply. He said: "*If we lived in a state where virtue was profitable, common sense would make us good, and greed would make us saintly.*" God in his wisdom does not reward goodness with instant prosperity, nor plague evildoers with irreversible, imminent disaster. And what that means is that real goodness, pure and simple, is best seen when it doesn't necessarily pay to be good.

There's another reason why God doesn't treat us justly – rewarding the good and punishing the bad. If he did, none of us could survive it. We all need more than justice and fair play. You may remember the story of the woman who went to have her portrait done. She said to the artist, "*For heaven's sake, try to do me*

*justice.*” To which he bluntly replied, “*Madam, what your face requires is not justice, but mercy.*”

That’s true for all of us. We all need mercy; without it we’d never survive. If everyone played by the rules, if everything were always fair, there would be no need for forgiveness, for kindness, for grace. Those are the things by which we live. Without them our friendships wouldn’t last; our marriages would be in ruins; every relationship in life would be soured. Do you really want what you deserve? Thank God my friends don’t give me what I deserve. They treat me lovingly, mercifully, with understanding and forgiveness. We might complain, “*Life isn’t fair!*” And God replies, “*If it were, I’d be the only one here to enjoy it.*” The gospel of God’s great love turns things upside-down and says that there can be no true justice without mercy.

C. But there is one last complaint. The thing that hurts the most, the bitterest complaint of all, comes from feeling that you’ve been betrayed by God. You work hard to be good, but what happens? It’s bad enough to see good people suffering unjustly. But what crushes your spirit is that evil not only survives, it flourishes. And what undermines your trust in God is that he doesn’t seem to do anything about it. In fact, he lets evil get away with murder.

Right here we come face-to-face with the deepest mystery of the gospel. And that is that God, for reasons that we cannot comprehend (which is what makes it a mystery) allowed all that is evil in the world to quite literally get away with murder. He permitted his only Son to give up his life on a cross. He allowed his own heart to be broken at evil’s hands. And when Jesus had died, when it was all over but the crying, it is as if God said to evil, “*Have you done all that you will?*” And evil replied, “*I’m satisfied. I have broken your heart and your life.*” Then, and only then, did God say, “*Now it’s my turn.*”

The only way you and I will ever be able to resolve our deepest anxieties, to find redress for our most painful complaints, is by allowing God to bring us through the death of his Son on our behalf, and to discover for ourselves, on the other side of his death, an amazing grace that will never die and will never let us go. God give us eyes to see the truth, a heart to embrace it, and the will to live it.