

A Sermon
Job Unraveled: Seeking God when everything has fallen apart
Preached at Plymouth Presbyterian Church,
St Helens, Oregon
Job 28:12-28
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Introduction:

Some of you know Job's story well. Others might recognize the phrases "the patience of Job" or "the trials of Job." For some, Job is just the name of a man who went through unimaginable hardship. Let me introduce him.

Scripture offers us various genres: history, prophecy, poetry, letters. Job falls under the category of "Wisdom literature," a collection of writings that attempts to ask—and sometimes answer—life's deepest questions. Job's story is no different; it wrestles with the timeless, unsettling question: "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

The Story Begins:

Job's story opens by presenting him as a man of integrity—faithful, devoted, and successful. He has a loving family and enjoys life's blessings. But in the heavens, Job's goodness catches God's attention, prompting a conversation with Satan, who plays the role of the "Tempter." Satan suggests that Job's faithfulness is simply the result of his comfortable life. If his blessings were stripped away, Satan claims, Job would surely curse God.

So, God allows Satan to test Job. In a single day, Job loses his wealth, his servants, and—most devastatingly—his children. His grief is profound, but he remains faithful: "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

Job's Testing Deepens:

But the Tempter isn't satisfied. He convinces God to test Job's health, afflicting him with painful sores. Job, now in physical and emotional agony, sits in ashes—broken yet unyielding. Three friends come to comfort him, observing his pain in silence, which resonates with the Jewish tradition of sitting shiva. Their silent presence is comforting, but when they finally speak, they challenge him, convinced he must have sinned to deserve such suffering.

So the Question of 'Why bad things happen to good people?':

This is where the story's tension deepens. Job maintains his innocence, and we know he's right because we've heard God affirm his righteousness. Yet, his friends are relentless, accusing him of hidden sins, certain that suffering is always a consequence of wrongdoing.

The same thinking exists today in the so-called “Prosperity Gospel,” which suggests that good things come to the faithful and bad things to those who lack faith. As historian Kate Bowler, author of “Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I’ve Loved,” discovered, this belief can be subtly embedded in faith, even when we don’t realize it. Diagnosed with cancer at age 35, she was forced to confront her unexamined belief that faithfulness would shield her from hardship.

She writes,

Married in my twenties, a baby in my thirties, I won a job at my alma mater straight out of graduate school. I felt breathless with the possibilities... It was certainty, plain and simple, that God had a worthy plan for my life in which every setback would also be a step forward. I wanted God to make me good and make me faithful, with just a few shining accolades along the way. Anything would do if hardships were only detours on my long life’s journey. I believed God would make a way. I don’t believe that anymore.

At 35 Bowler was diagnosed with Stage IV colon cancer. It was then she realized that she had believed a lie. She had believed in the Prosperity Gospel, without even realizing it. The conviction that a blameless, faithful life would also be a smooth one was shattered. This set her on a journey, one that unfolded alongside her cancer treatment journey, to reckon with and unteach herself the lies that had, to her surprise, had actually formed the foundation of her faith. She grappled.

Here is Job’s Journey Toward Wisdom:

As Job’s story unfolds, he grapples with his suffering, seeking answers. But instead of providing clarity, his search for wisdom leads him to a sobering realization: true wisdom may be beyond human grasp. Personally, I thought I would be smarter, maybe even wiser by this age. Yet, I am learning something every day. Job asks, “Where can wisdom be found?”, concluding that it resides solely with God. Job realizes that the only genuine human response to God’s unfathomable wisdom is reverence: “The fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.”

As Job grapples, he develops a New Understanding of Faith:

Halfway through his journey, Job begins to see that faith doesn’t guarantee understanding. It doesn’t guarantee answers. But it does offer us the assurance that we are held by God—even in times of suffering. As Kate Bowler expressed in an interview, “God is there, no matter what...sometimes we feel it, sometimes we don’t, but we know it when it is happening.” This might be the only form of prosperity gospel worth embracing: the gospel in which God is there to fill the cracks, to hold us through the unanswerable questions.

Conclusion: What can Job teach us when life has been unraveled?

1. Job’s story ultimately teaches that it’s okay to wrestle with God, to ask “Why?” and not have an answer.

2. Faith does not eliminate suffering, nor does it offer all the answers. Instead, faith is about trusting in God's wisdom when ours fails and we unravel.
3. In the end, Job, a man who began as "good and God-fearing," realizes that wisdom is a lifelong journey—a journey to find rest in God even when understanding eludes us.

May we learn from Job to hold fast to our faith, to ask our questions boldly, and to trust that we are held by God the weaver, even when we walk through the valley of unanswered questions.