

Explore the Bible Series for June 18: The trials of life are not always easily explained

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The trials of life are not always easily explained

• Job 15:1-21:34

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When Galileo Galilei read Nicolaus Copernicus's book *On the Revolution of the Heavenly Spheres*, he was intrigued by the hypothesis that the sun, rather than the earth, was the center of the solar system. Galileo, however, was not one to take the ideas of another person by faith; he had to test those ideas to see if they were true.

Galileo built telescopes to probe the heavens, and he took accurate measurements of the moon, stars and planets. His final conclusion was that Copernicus was correct in his assessment: the sun was indeed the center of the solar system.



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Many of Galileo's contemporaries, particularly some theologians, were not happy with Galileo's teachings and writings. Galileo's ideas, they said, contradicted the Bible and also contradicted the works of Aristotle, which were held in high esteem at the time.

On one occasion, Galileo asked some colleagues, "If I take a heavy ball and a lighter ball and drop them at the same time, which will hit the ground first?" "The heavy ball," they responded, "for Aristotle says that heavier objects fall to the earth faster than lighter objects." "Well," said Galileo, "if Aristotle said it, we don't need to test it. ... But let's try it anyway."

To the amazement of his colleagues, the two balls hit at exactly the same time. Galileo has disproved Aristotle, and his writings threatened to disprove the view of the universe the church officially promulgated as well, all because he insisted on believing what his own experience told him, rather than simply accepting the authority of tradition.

In their second round of speeches, Job's friends continue to cite the authority of tradition, which says the righteous prosper and the wicked are punished. Job, however, has a different perspective, because he has had a different experience.

Although he doesn't understand it, and in fact he would prefer his friends' view of the world were right, he has become convinced it is not. Bitter experience has shown him that sometimes the righteous suffer, and sometimes the wicked prosper. Life isn't as simple as tradition would have

people believe, but Job believes it is important for people to know the truth.

Job 15:1-35

Eliphaz is one of those who believes tradition must be adhered to at all costs. He is a prime example of a religious “expert” who claims to have knowledge but really doesn’t. For Eliphaz, Job’s challenge of traditional wisdom is dangerous and threatens people’s faith in God. “You are doing away with the fear of God, and hindering meditation before God” (v. 4).

It is inconceivable to Eliphaz that Job might have a better understanding of the world than teachers of traditional wisdom: “What do you know that we do not know?” he asks (v. 9). Everybody knows, he says, that “the wicked writhe in pain all their days” (v. 20). He might as well be saying, “Don’t confuse me with facts!”

Too many people today are so invested in conventional, traditional ways of thinking that they are unable to see the world doesn’t correspond to their view of the universe.

Job 16:9-17

After trading insults with Eliphaz (16:3; 15:2), Job turns his attention to God, with whom his chief argument is. For all of Job’s words to the contrary, Job himself is a product of traditional wisdom. He no longer believes he lives in a moral cause and effect universe, where the righteous prosper and the wicked suffer, but he thinks he should. Furthermore, it is God’s fault that neither the righteous nor the wicked regularly get their just deserts.

In this section, Job uses the language of an individual lament, such as is

frequently found in the Psalms, but with one important difference. Whereas in the typical psalm of lament, the psalmist complains about his enemies and asks God for deliverance and even vengeance, Job cannot do so because his complaint is with God, whom he blames for his circumstances.

Job 19:23-29

Job's ongoing complaint against God leads to one of the most enigmatic passages in the book. The traditional rendering of Job 19:25 is "I know that my redeemer lives," and the traditional understanding of the passage is that the redeemer is none other than God.

It is true that God is sometimes referred to as a redeemer in the biblical text (Exodus 6:6; Psalm 103:4), but it is questionable whether God is to be understood in this passage. First, it must be noted that the term "redeemer" probably is not the best translation of this word; in the Old Testament the idea of "vindicator" or "defender" is generally closer to the meaning of the word in context.

Second, Job's expressed attitude toward God in this passage, as in others, makes it doubtful Job would want to rely on God to be his vindicator. It seems more likely Job has in mind another (semi-)divine being, perhaps a member of the heavenly council, who would stand before God and plead his case (the "angel of the Lord" in Zechariah 3:1-5, and Jesus in 1 John 2:1). This being is alluded to elsewhere as an umpire (Job 9:33-35) and a witness (Job 16:19-21).

Job 20:1-29; 21:1-26

What is the fate of the wicked? Zophar claims in no uncertain terms that

“the exulting of the wicked is short” (v. 5), and either they or their children (v. 10) will suffer the divine wrath.

Job begs to differ. He has observed that the wicked reach old age and grow wealthy, and their children prosper (21:7-8). At the end of their long, happy lives, they descend to Sheol, the place of the dead, in peace (21:13).

Zophar and Job agree on one thing: it is not right for the wicked to prosper. Zophar closes his eyes and pretends it doesn't happen, while Job realizes it happens but doesn't like it.

Discussion questions

- What are the relative values of adhering to tradition and challenging authority? Are there human authorities that we have a hard time challenging? Why?
- How do we deal with a situation in which someone we consider to be a man or woman of God speaks improperly on God's behalf? What are the dangers of putting someone on a pedestal? What are the dangers of people putting themselves on pedestals?
- Is Job right to long for a world in which justice prevails for both the righteous and the wicked? What responsibilities do Christians have for making the world more just?
- How would Job's wish for a vindicator be changed if he had lived after the time of Christ?
- Why do the wicked often prosper, while the righteous do not?



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