

Reward & Punishment in Job

Back to School: Part 2 “Reward & Punishment in Job”

Rev. Cameron D St. Michael – August 13, 2023

11th Sunday after Pentecost

Readings: Job (various)

Reflection: Psalm 114

Greeting: Scripture helps you to be wise in seeking salvation. All scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching. Scripture equips each person to do what is good. Let us learn and continue to grow in Christ our Lord!

Prayer: God, we believe that you provide us with all that we need in this life. You have not set us adrift in a sea of ignorance but have set us on the path of wisdom. Help us that we may grow in your love and knowledge. Let us never stop learning about your mercy and grace. Give to us a spirit that is eager to always know more so that we may do more for your sake. Help us to walk in your ways and that we may always seek your truth. And give to us a heart that we may love you more day by day as we share your love with the world. And may you guide us and lead us through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Reflection: Psalm 114

When Israel went out from Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange language, Judah became God’s sanctuary, Israel his dominion. The sea looked and fled; Jordan turned back. The mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs. Why is it, O sea, that you flee? O Jordan, that you turn back? O mountains, that you skip like rams? O hills, like lambs? Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob, who turns the rock into a pool of water, the flint into a spring of water. (Psalm 114 NRSV)*

We read the words of Psalm 114 and we hear of God’s power and deliverance. That the earth trembles at the might of the Lord. That God’s knowledge is unsearchable and strength unknowable. Can you rest in the strength of the Lord even if you cannot fully understand it? Do you accept the mercy God has for you even if you can’t fathom the depths of God’s love? How can we share the love and peace that God gives us with others? How can we help others to experience the hope that Christ has instilled in your heart? How can we join together to always learn more in God’s love and care?

Prayer: Lord, we turn to you in all things knowing that you are always there for us. Help us to continue to grow in knowledge and truth by your Holy Spirit. Help us to grow in mercy and grace through our risen Savior. As we come before you this day we bring to you the concerns and joys that we have shared aloud together. We bring before you the unspoken worries and

celebrations of our hearts. May you guide us and lead us so that we know your blessing in our joy and our sorrow. We pray you will help us to grow in love through our laughter and our tears. May your steadfast love and faithfulness be our constant guide and companion. And may we always continue to grow in faith and in love, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Now let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Sermon:

Our scripture readings for today come from the New Revised Standard Version Bible. Our reading for today comes from Job and will contain various readings.

There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil. One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and the accuser also came among them to present himself before the Lord. The Lord said to the accuser, "Where have you come from?" The accuser answered the Lord, "From going to and fro on the earth and from walking up and down on it." The Lord said to the accuser, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason." Then the accuser answered the Lord, "Skin for skin! All that the man has he will give for his life. But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face." The Lord said to the accuser, "Very well, he is in your power; only spare his life." So the accuser went out from the presence of the Lord and inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself and sat among the ashes. Then his wife said to him, "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God and die." But he said to her, "You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive good from God and not receive evil?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips. Now when Job's three friends heard of all these troubles that had come upon him, each of them set out from his home—Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. They met together to go and console and comfort him. After this Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth.

Then Eliphaz the Temanite answered: "If one ventures a word with you, will you be offended? But who can keep from speaking? See, you have instructed many; you have strengthened the weak hands. Your words have supported those who were stumbling, and you have made firm the feeble knees. But now it has come to you, and you are impatient; it touches you, and you are dismayed. Is not your fear of God your confidence and the integrity of your ways your hope?" Then Bildad the Shuhite answered: "How long will you say these things and the words of your mouth be a great wind? Does God pervert justice? Or does the Almighty pervert the right? If your children sinned against him, he delivered them into the power of their transgression. If you will seek God and make supplication to the Almighty, if you are pure and upright, surely then he will rouse himself for you and restore to you your rightful place. Though your beginning was small, your latter days will be very great."

Then Job answered: “God will not turn back his anger; the helpers of Rahab bowed beneath him. How then can I answer him, choosing my words with him? Though I am innocent, I cannot answer him; I must appeal to my accuser for my right. If I summoned him and he answered me, I do not believe that he would listen to my voice. For he crushes me with a tempest and multiplies my wounds without cause; he will not let me get my breath but fills me with bitterness. If it is a contest of strength, he is the strong one! If it is a matter of justice, who can summon him? Though I am innocent, my own mouth would condemn me; though I am blameless, he would prove me perverse. I am blameless; I do not know myself; I loathe my life. It is all one; therefore I say, ‘He destroys both the blameless and the wicked.’ When disaster brings sudden death, he mocks at the calamity of the innocent. The earth is given into the hand of the wicked; he covers the eyes of its judges— if it is not he, who then is it?”

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man; I will question you, and you shall declare to me. “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy? Can you lift up your voice to the clouds, so that a flood of waters may cover you? Can you send forth lightnings, so that they may go and say to you, ‘Here we are’? Who has put wisdom in the inward parts or given understanding to the mind? Who has the wisdom to number the clouds? Or who can tilt the waterskins of the heavens when the dust runs into a mass and the clods cling together? “Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? Anyone who argues with God must respond.” Then Job answered the Lord: “See, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer, twice but will proceed no further.” Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: “Gird up your loins like a man; I will question you, and you declare to me. Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be justified? Then Job answered the Lord: “I know that you can do all things and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. ‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’ Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me that I did not know. ‘Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you declare to me.’ I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.”

After the Lord had spoken these words to Job, the Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite: “My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. Now therefore take seven bulls and seven rams, and go to my servant Job, and offer up for yourselves a burnt offering, and my servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly, for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has done.” So Eliphaz the Temanite and Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite went and did what the Lord had told them, and the Lord accepted Job’s prayer. And the Lord restored the fortunes of Job when he had prayed for his friends, and the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before.

(Job 1:1; 2:1-11; 3:1; 4:1-6; 8:1-7; 9:1,13-24; 38:1-7,34-38; 40:2-8; 42:1-10 NRSV)*

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

So, coming into this message, I knew this one was going to be difficult. And the difficulty was in figuring out which parts I wanted to include in our readings for today. I went a little longer than I usually do, because I wanted to capture some of the essence of the argument that is taking place in Job because that argument can feel foreign to the Vacation Bible School version of Job. Now, I call it that because there was once a Vacation Bible School version of Job that I got to witness. I was not part of the planning. I was just there as a guest. And the story of Job went like this: Job was a righteous man and Satan tried to tempt Job into cursing God and afflicted Job with all sorts of problems so that Job would turn on God. But Job was a righteous man, and he never swayed from his faith. And because of that, God rewarded him. If we look at what we have in Job today that's not really the story that we actually get. It's easy for us to want to make that the story, because it makes Job easy to understand.

Now, the first thing I want to do is encourage you to go and read all of Job. And this might take a while because Job is forty-two chapters long and is a difficult read. One thing to know here is that Job is wisdom literature, Job is not history. And I say this because if we looked at the events of Job as history, we'd be left with even more questions. But Job is Wisdom literature. Job is meant to teach us something about God and faith. Everything is happening as part of Job's narrative to drive the poetic discussions that take place. I wanted to cover Job in this series because sometimes the idea that we have of Job is still that kid's version. And instead, we find a story about humans trying to understand God. Part of that is understanding punishment and reward. I'll do my best to give a summary of Job. When we start, we see that Job is described as an upright man. He prays for his family, and he takes care of his business. Job does well. And then we see a picture of the heavenly courts. And the first thing that happens that throws us off is Satan appears. Except it's not Satan. At least not who we could call the devil. The word is just a Hebrew word, not a name. And it's what you would call an adversary. As one of my learned mentors once called him, he's the prosecuting attorney. He's supposed to accuse people, that's his whole purpose in the heavenly courts. He accuses Job and that's what sets everything in motion. And it's what sets us up to be able to discuss justice, reward, and punishment within Job. And so Job loses everything, his children, his livestock, all his wealth is wiped out. And he still doesn't give in. He does not resent God. He does not curse God. In our reading, I came in on the second meeting of the heavenly court. Because now God declares that Job has remained faithful even in the face of disaster. The adversary responds that Job accepted the death of his children because it meant that he was still alive. The new claim is that if God were to afflict Job personally, he would curse God. So, God approves. Now, one thing to remember is that this is meant to drive all of the debate that is about to occur. It is a way to introduce the theological discussion in Job and doesn't need to be taken literally.

Job goes out because he is now afflicted with a skin disease. His wife wants nothing more to do with him. His friends come to comfort him, but they seem to be of little comfort because this is where the debate begins. One of Job's friends tries to comfort him and tell him

that he needs to be patient. He's instructed many with words of wisdom, but now needs to listen to his own advice. Another friend asks him if he really thinks that God would not pay attention to justice. And part of this back and forth is that the friends think Job must have done something to deserve punishment. His children must have sinned to deserve death. Job must have done something to bring this on his own head. And that if Job is up right, then he just has to be patient and wait. They begin a back and forth where at first Job just wishes he were dead. Then Job begins to wonder if this is just. And he starts to wonder why this is happening. Job begins to sound like he's accusing God of being in the wrong. Job is trying to figure out why, if he is innocent, why is he condemned? And that there is no response he could make if God did give him voice. And Job starts to wonder where justice is in the world. And there's a long debate in Job about punishment and justice. Job doesn't think he deserves this, and his friends insist he had to have done something to deserve this. Job can't see justice with the bad things happening in his life.

Job questions God. And this doesn't sit well with God. God wants to know why Job is darkening counsel by words without knowledge. And God responds to Job by wanting to know if Job can comprehend God at all. This isn't the "well done good and faithful servant" version of Job that Vacation Bible School got. This is God demanding an accounting from Job. God doesn't necessarily contradict Job's ponderings about a lack of justice. God instead focuses on his sovereignty and that he is unfathomable. He humbles Job, who repents in dust and ashes, declaring he is but human. At this point God turns on Job's friend, because Job's friends have also misunderstood the situation. Because they were claiming that Job did something to deserve everything that happened. That his family must have done something. He must have done something. That somebody must have sinned to make this happen. To Job's friends, this was punishment. And God says they're wrong. We knew they were wrong from the beginning, but we might recognize some of their arguments. So Job does what he used to do for his children, and he offers up prayers and offerings to God. And in the end, God restores his friends and then God restores the fortunes of Job giving him twice as much as he had before. Now, so far, in Job we've had a very, very long dialogue about justice and punishment. And it has been made clear this wasn't a punishment for Job. But then, we have this ending where we might misunderstand rewards. The ending goes on and talks about the way that Job's fortunes were restored. He has seven more sons and three more daughters and twice as much of everything as he had before. What it doesn't say is that Job is rewarded. What we do hear is that Job's prayer is accepted.

And this goes into part of the point that's being made across all of the speeches we hear from God in Job. God's sovereignty is over everything. God's will is beyond our understanding. God decides to bless Job and to give him more than he ever had before. But it doesn't erase what Job has been through. Because Job has experienced loss. That can't be erased, and I don't think it is meant to be erased. Job isn't credited with earning anything back; he was just chastised by God. But God decides to bless him. Part of what Job is teaching us is that we

cannot always understand what happens in life. We are not in a very good position to declare the purpose for everything that happens in life. We aren't in a very good position to be the judge of God. But it doesn't do us any good to try to lay blame in the face of tragedy like Job's friends. Telling someone that their suffering is their own fault doesn't help them and it isn't love. It doesn't do us any good to sulk and complain like Job either. Even in the face of tragedy, we can move forward. Because God never leaves. God is still there for us, even if we are too angry to see it. We can still make the most of what we have in this life and God will still be there. I think that is part of our grown-up message from Job.

Now, there's a lot more happening in Job, and I do strongly encourage you to read all of it. Because this is just touching the very surface of Job. But I hope that this has given you something to think about. That we can reconsider how we think about rewards and punishments. That we think about the way that we move forward with life. That we need to recognize that we can lose track of life and end up hurling insults at each other and still never come to a better understanding. Or we can support each other in love and learn to move forward. That we move forward with grace and love in the face of tragedy and that we support one another in times of need. I pray that you will go and read the rest of Job so that you can understand more of what I've shared with you here. And maybe today you can take comfort in knowing that we can't always know and that it is OK. That there is always something more to learn, and there's always more life to live. And I hope it inspires you to discover more, to grow more, and to do more. That as we grow in wisdom we grow in love with God. And that we grow in the grace of Christ, secure in the knowledge that we can always do the best we can by moving ever forward and ever onward in love. Amen.

Prayer of Confession and Pardon: God, you are with us even when we turn away from you. Guide us back into your loving arms. Judge us not by the perfection of our actions but show us mercy and love. We have strayed like lost sheep from your ways, failing both in what we have done and what we have failed to do. Bring us back into your fold that you may guide us and lead us in all things. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy upon us and forgive us. May we walk in your love and trust your ways. Amen.

Almighty God have mercy upon you. May the Lord forgive all your sins and lift you up in love through Jesus Christ our Lord, and by the Holy Spirit keep you in life eternal. Amen.

Offering: If you are so moved to make an offering, you may send it to the church treasurer, or you may send it to the PO Box listed below. We are still the church, and the church still needs your support to keep doing all the important work that we do.

Lord's Prayer

Dismissal with Blessing: May we go forth reflecting God's love in our lives as we go forth in the peace of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our Current Series – Back to School

Our current series is going to be taking a look at lessons we may have learned in a children's Sunday School or Vacation Bible School. But did we learn everything about the story that we need to know? What more can we learn now as adults? Each week we take on a new lesson as we go back to school!

Next Week: Reward & Punishment in Job.

For this message, we will be looking at how we often misunderstand rewards, punishment, and restoration in Job's story, with a focus on the final chapter.

Prayer List

Rev Angie Lee	Bishop Frank Beard	Our Conference	Our Healthcare Workers
Patti Corder and the Greenup	Ambulance Crew	Eric Veach	Ed & Verna Titus
Henry Catey	Jake Kiser	Cindy Cisney	Tricia Adkins
Don Stewart	Ronnie Winstead	Lauren Stewart	Tom Finley
Laura Carlen	Rosie Chancellor	Chuck Hogan	Brittany Gilbert
Phil Hawickhorst	Ray Carr	Alice Sherwood	Richard Durham
Kathy Hanks	Steve Carlen	Emily Blade	Tim Schnauz
Donna Carlen	Ernie Peters	Jess Shoot	Stanley Kiser
Corine Howard	Don Gilmore	Shirley Jester	Connie Brown
Marsha Overton	Linda Carlen	Michael Nichols	Paul Cox
Taylor Waldorf	Harriet Tucker	Becky McGuinness	Janet Yokum
Donna Farley	Gary & Mary Winterrowd	Leo Smith	Sue & Bob Smyser
Larry Thompson	Evelyn Sue Icenogle	Greg Williams	Martha Roberts
Charlie & Charlotte Baxter	Paul Schulte	Lavon Figgins	Kara Newton

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