

“You’ve got the wrong God”
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John 16:20-22 and Job 1:1, 2:1-10

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Back when I was a college student (more years than I care to recount), I studied in Greece, and spent some time in the ancient city of Delphi. It’s a beautiful place, a mountain dressed in trees and marble ruins and soaring god-like vistas. But what it’s most famous for is its oracle, the great priestess who spoke cryptic prophecies that governed the lives of kings, city-states, and philosophers. What struck me, though, was the odd iconography of Dionysus. Dionysus had no business being in Delphi. These were Apollo’s stomping grounds—his temple and oracle. Apollo was the Greek god of reason, order, civilization, a god of marble and philosophy and statecraft. Apollo was the kind of god you’d be proud to bring home to mom and dad. Dionysus was Apollo’s antithesis, a god of chaos, revelry, passion, flowing wine and parties, a god of dark forest where bearded goat men played their bawdy lutes and chased nymphs. Dionysus was the bad boy you did not bring home to mom and dad.

What was he doing here? The myth said that Apollo only dwelled in Delphi for nine months out of the year. During the winter, he and his priests would go elsewhere, and for three months, Dionysus and his priests had the run of the place. Classical scholars have suggested all kinds of theories to explain this, but I think I know the true explanation: even the most reasonable god needs a little pizzazz.

Job thought he had a reasonable God. The first chapter of Job describes a man who would make burnt offerings just on the off chance that his children *might* have sinned. He thought he had this predictable God all figured out. Be a good person, live a pious and righteous life, and God will make good things happen for you. He was the Joel Osteen of his time, an evangelist of the prosperity gospel: believe hard enough, pray hard enough, and donate enough money, and God will make you rich. One hand washes the other. For a while, it worked. Job wasn’t just rich; he was super rich. Scripture says he was “the richest of all the people of the east.” And not just in money, but in family, friends, and community. Everyone loved Job.

Under this logic, bad things should only happen to bad people. Indeed, Job’s friends will later insist that Job must have done something wrong to cause God to punish him like this. By the second chapter, Job is still a believer in this reasonable God, even as his wife tells him to “curse God and die.” But a few chapters later, after Job is bereft of everything, losing his herds and flocks, the roof over his head, his health, his standing in the community, even his own children, Job wishes he had never been born at all. Impoverished, lonely, and grieving, Job says of his once knowable, all-powerful God: “I do not see him... I do not know him” (Job 9:11).

Why do bad things happen? Last week, we avoided the question. This week, we face it.

Some of you might remember the first sermon I preached after returning from my bereavement leave for our stillborn sons Ezra and Leo. Of all Scripture, it was to the Book of Job that I then turned.

Because Job suffers like we suffer. You pour yourself into a marriage, do all the right things, only to have it fall apart. You build a life of the mind, only to have it slowly taken from you by dementia. You work three jobs, but try as you might, you can't get out of that cycle of poverty. You walk on eggshells, but it doesn't matter: he still hits you. The hurricane still comes. The earthquake still cracks the earth. The cancer still eats away. The gun still fires.

Why?

It takes many chapters in the Book of Job, but God does eventually answer. God says, *Job, you've got the wrong God; let me show you who I really am.*

God reveals a desert—a wasteland void of human life—and dumps buckets of rain on it, lavishly wasting water just to see what might grow. God shows Job the Leviathan and Behemoth, big lumbering beasts that threaten the world with chaos. God shows him the wild mountain goat, the desert donkey, the buffalo that will never plow a field, the bizarre ostrich. As scholar and author Ellen Davis writes, “All these creatures in the divine photo album have one thing in common: they are completely untamable. Every animal in which God glories is completely useless.”

God isn't an all-powerful puppet master, pulling the strings, putting good here and bad there—we his sensible automatons. God isn't a clockmaker, each part designed to fulfill its very useful and predictable function. God is—according to the Book of Job—a poet, delighting in the freedom of his verse. Or even better—to use the most prevalent analogy throughout Scripture—God is a parent, who births life, guides and cares for it, but out of that love, must allow her children freedom to walk and stumble, to grow and become.

For what is the one thing that a parent desires for their children more than safety? It is the freedom to live fully as themselves. Otherwise, we would strap our children to cushioned chairs and never let them leave the house; we would do anything to keep the bad away. The problem—and every parent knows this—is we would also, inadvertently, keep away the good. Our children would never fall in love, never dance or get muddy, never try and fail and try again, never see the beauty of the Grand Teton, never know courage or sacrifice or wisdom, never be anything but our safe little puppet.

You've got the wrong God, says the Book of Job. This isn't a God of control; this is a God of love. And love means to yield control. Is that not the witness of the cross? That instead of calling down an army of angels to smite and prevent this evil, God instead subjected God's self to this massacre, giving up all power, just for the chance that God's children might know that this is their God: a suffering God of love who will stop at nothing for their freedom. In other words, your mama.

A safe, predictable life is not what God offers. It wasn't safe to create, to incarnate, to love us. But God did. Jesus repeatedly says that to follow him is dangerous and costly. He says you will suffer.

But a meaningful life—a life of wresting purpose from the basest of moments, of daring the unknown, of braving love and loss, of standing shoulder to shoulder with the oppressed, a life of faith and courage and wonder and struggle—that is the life God offers.

Because the point isn't to be safe. It's to live. To live everything. And yeah, there are some days I would trade it, so that I might not hurt. But, you know, there are other days, days of woods and laughter and a child that makes my heart sing, that I wouldn't trade it for anything. And I thank God for it. That I have the privilege of walking this short path that is my life, all its pain and disappointment and all its joy and revelation.

Why does God allow bad things? Because God has built freedom into the very structure of the universe. Even in the Genesis story of paradise, before the fall, there was choice. The same fundamental possibility that allows for a sonnet or a sunrise or love is the same possibility that allows for violence or cancer.

Call it the devil, as the Book of Job does. Call it chance. Call it whatever you want. But bad things just happen. The sun and rain, as Jesus says elsewhere, fall on good and bad alike.

I know. Surely, God could have granted us freedom with some limits—just as parents do. God could have said we'll have freedom up until... you know... murder or the Holocaust, and then he'd intervene and stop us. God could have allowed freedom in nature and evolution but capped it off at hurricanes and pandemics.

Maybe that means everything I've just said is wrong. Or maybe it means that any limit would also limit what we can become, what this existence can become. To limit how far we can fall is to limit how far we can rise. To limit the depth of human suffering is to limit the height of human wisdom, compassion, and faith.

Maybe. But what Scripture does make clear is that freedom doesn't mean we're on our own. We are gifted a Spirit within us that can raise us up and turn our hurt to joy. We are told that no matter what happens we always have love and a home waiting for us. There is no failure, no fall too great that would cause us to be rejected.

Frederick Buechner once wrote, "The grace of God means something like... Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you."

God is with us, not above us pulling the strings, but here, with us, within us, around us, loving and freeing us (and yeah, helping us) to become something more, something more like God, something more like... pizzazz. **Amen.**