

# Job and Isaiah: Why Does God Allow Suffering

Emma Waggett

Since the dawn of civilization, mankind has worked to reckon with how God, a benevolent deity and source of life, allows suffering to touch his creations, especially those who genuinely try to live a life of piety. The books of Job and Isaiah in the Old Testament of the Hebrew Bible, in particular, have tried to make sense of this age-old question in two contrasting rationals, the first being presented in Job: bad things may happen on Earth, but we should not be dismayed, after all Earth and our possessions are temporary, what is more important is our relationship and reverence toward God. Oppositely Isaiah, particularly Isaiah 1, chastises those who have blasphemed against God as incurring their own misfortune, through their use of free will. Though both books present different interpretations of why bad things happen, ultimately, both instruct the need for steadfast faith, emphasize the fleeting nature of Earth and its goods, and express an overarching theme of God's will as above human understanding.

The book of Job opens with an introduction to the pious Job, a man who is committed to God and, in return, incredibly blessed; he is a husband, father, and successful farmer. One day in the heavens, God mentions the piety of Job to Satan, who scoffs at it and claims that Job's faithfulness is only a result of his blessings and that his blessings, when stripped away from him, would reveal Job to be shallow, leading him to curse God. Intrigued, God allows

Satan to test Job. Satan's first acts horrifically kill all of Job's children, some livestock, and servants. Though he hears these misfortunes one after another, Job's first instinct is to praise God, "...[n]aked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." (Job 1:21 KJV). After suffering the emotional revelation of his children's deaths and the economic losses of servants and livestock, key to his livelihood and identity, Job finds wisdom within himself to recognize each of these as earthly matters, a part of the cycle of life, of which he too will one day return into. Job's stark view of his losses does not diminish their emotional toll but demonstrates his continual piety as he refuses to curse God in a moment of helplessness.

Baffled, Satan proceeds to hurt Job directly by inflicting him with painful sores; in his agony, Job's wife suggests he curse God so he may die and thus have relief from his suffering. Job replies, "...[t]hou speakest as one of the foolish women speaketh. What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?" (Job 2:10 KJV). This verse presents the author's first direct grappling with the idea of bad things happening to us. Here, Job serves as a vessel to communicate the idea that if we are to find blessings in our lives, then in equal measure, we will find hardship and, furthermore, should expect this dynamic. This grappling serves

as both a promise and a warning: for those suffering, it presents the comfort that good things will eventually come, and for those smug in their good fortunes, it reminds them just how fast they can and will be humbled. Though Job remains pious, his patience and endurance soon wears thin, and he comes to curse the day he was born, embroiled in his own anguish, Job laments, “Why did I not from the womb? Why did I not give up the ghost when I came out of the belly?” (Job 3:11 KJV). Job’s friends who have now joined him believe his suffering is a result of sin and plead with him to repent, which results in a long debate, in which Job asserts his innocence, helplessness and questions the righteousness of God as he watches over humanity. The climax of this argument comes when Elihu, one of Job’s friends, proclaims, “Touching the Almighty, we cannot find him out: he is excellent in power, and in judgment, and plenty of justice: he will not afflict. / Men do therefore fear him: he respecteth not any that are wise of heart.” (Job 37:23-24 KJV) This verse speaks to the mystery of God’s work; mankind cannot fully grasp His ways which are beyond our own, but we know all is done for the best. At this moment, God himself joins the debate and berates Job for presuming to understand ways that are above him, questioning if he was alive for creation or even possessing an inkling of the divine power God has. These rhetorical questions present the case of God’s ways; they are above Job’s and our own, and therefore, we should not presume to curse our suffering; the reasoning of which is beyond our comprehension. The book finishes with Job humbled and restored in God’s favor. Though Job had always been pious, the experience of bad fortunes and loss of earthly goods ultimately reinforced and strengthened his faith. Though God’s ways were above his, there was a silver lining to Job’s suffering, and to an extent, the author of Job suggests the same of our trials and tribulations.

Though we may never understand why they happen, they often give us a chance to deepen our faith, grow, and divorce ourselves from false reassurance in earthly goods and fortunes.

While the Book of Job presents a complete circle narrative that encompasses the enrichment of Job’s piety as a result of his tested faith and questioning of God’s authority, the Book of Isaiah, on the other hand, presents God’s plans for the messiah who will be God’s rule on Earth, with Jerusalem as the center of God’s majesty. The first chapter of Isaiah rebukes Judah for its sins and describes how it is the cause of its destruction. Here, bad things happen to people because they sin and turn away from God; misfortunes directly correlate to one’s actions. Isaiah, a prophet, with God speaking through him, calls on Judah to repent: “Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the Lord, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward.” (Isaiah 1:4 KJV). Judah’s misfortunes are connected not only to the sins of individuals but also to the collective wickedness of the nation; they suffer individually and as a nation because, as a nation, they have turned from God.

Furthermore, God rebukes the attempts of Judah to earn His good graces through burnt offerings, implying that actions of reverence do not hold a flame when the people themselves still sin: “To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith the Lord: I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts, and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats.” (Isaiah 1:11 KJV). This verse implies that when bad things happen to good people due to their sinning, genuine remorse must be shown, not simply going through the motions of repentance. It presents the idea that, like Job, one must have a steadfast faith that is true, remaining in the good and bad. What use is a burnt offering or prayers begging

for good fortune when one only calls on God in difficult circumstances? Such actions only reveal the selfishness of mankind and one's actions. Isaiah continues by explaining how one can avoid God's wrath: "If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land: / But if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it." (Isaiah 1:19-20 KJV). This verse reinforces the idea that sin and wickedness incur bad fortunes; they result from one's own free will and decisions, just as one's blessings and good fortunes come from a life of righteousness and piety.

To conclude, the Book of Job and the Book of Isaiah in the Old Testament present two contrasting views on why bad things happen to people. The Book of Job presents hardship as a transformative experience, which, even for the most pious individuals, reinforces God's majesty and allows us

to deepen our faith and shift our attention away from earthly goods and fortunes. On the other hand, the book of Isaiah presents bad fortunes as a direct result of our behavior, using the city of Judah and its people as a sign of sin and the decay it causes. The book warns readers that their futures and fates lay in their hands; while obedience to God will bring good fortune, sinning will bring bad fortunes. Though both books present contrasting ideas, overarching themes reinforce the need to rely on God for guidance and protection.

### **Bibliography**

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