

**Title:** Beach Reads: WHY? How It Goes Down

**Preaching:** Randy Spleth, Senior Minister

**Scripture:** [Job 1:1-5](#)

**Text:** [Job 2:1-6](#)

**E-mail:** [Randy Spleth](#)



Once upon a time, there was a man who lived in the land of Uz. That's the beginning of our beach read this summer. The Bible is filled with stories just like you read on the beach or at the lake on summer vacation. Over the past decade, each summer I've offered Bible Beach reads as a

way for us to step in the stories of scripture and engage them in ways similar to our summer reading experiences.

I warn you. This year's read is different. It's not a romance or a mystery. It's not a feel-good story even though it does have, in an odd way, something of a happily ever after ending. It fits an ancient form of literature and in fact, may well be the oldest story in the Bible. There is a strong belief that it was first shared orally around campfires, a divine folk-legend. It may have been acted out as a play, two or three thousand years ago. A play makes sense because it has distinct acts and because it has been re-written and performed as modern plays. <sup>1</sup>

A folk-legend, a play or perhaps more accurately, an epic-poem, like Homer's *Iliad* or the *Babylonian Gilgamesh*. Do you remember reading them in school? It is a story in verse form about a heroic journey of a single person. Like an epic poem, it is not intended to simply tell us an account of a real character; rather, it is a larger than life poetic dramatization meant to teach a lesson to all that heard it.

It could be that it is all three of those things and likely is. But I think it is also this: an exercise in divinely inspired creative writing by an unknown author who started with two questions. Who is the best person I know and what's the worst that could happen? He is sitting down to work through a particular problem, using these two questions to address a much bigger question, maybe one of the biggest of all. It

is one you can't help but ask. The question is this. If God is all-good and all-powerful, why do terrible things happen? Anyone ever asked that question?

This is what an unknown author writing nearly 2,500 years ago sets out to explore. It was written at a time when people believed that God was responsible for everything that happened, good or bad. They also believed that if something good happened to you it was because God was rewarding you and that if something bad happened to you it was because God was punishing you. They believed that God rewarded the righteous and punished the wicked. Some people still believe this.<sup>2</sup>

So our Bible beach read is an exercise in spiritually inspired creative writing. The author of Job wasn't in the Lord's throne room where he overheard a conversation with between God and Satan and come back down to earth to report it. He was trying to address the theology of the day and how flawed it was, to explore the problem of evil. That's the purpose of this year's beach read so lets' get to it.

"There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job." (Job 1:1a) Everybody knew Job even if they didn't know exactly where Uz was. No one does.<sup>3</sup> It was over there somewhere, east of the Euphrates because Job was "was the greatest of all the people of the east." That's why everybody knows Job. It's why the author is writing this story. Job was pretty much the coolest guy alive for several reasons.

For one thing, Job was rich, the richest person in the East, maybe even the richest person anyone knew. Think Jeff Bezos or Bill Gates rich. He has lots of property and he needs lots of property because he has lots of stuff. Specifically, he has 7000 sheep which is nothing to baa at and 3,000 camels, both one hump and two. He also owns 500 yoked pair of oxen and 500 donkeys. It takes a lot of property to pasture all of these animals and a lot of people to look after them. Fortunately, Job's got a lot of servants cleaning up the mess all these animals make. Job's cool because he's rich, a gub with a Midas touch.

But's he's also cool because he has a wonderful family. He is the father of seven sons and three daughters and they are great children. He loves them dearly and raised them well. Each is grown and successful in their own right and surprisingly, there was no sibling rivalry between the ten of them. No "daddy liked you better than me." They loved each other so much that they would ...hold feasts in one

another's houses in turn, and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them." (Job 1:4) Job was cool because he was rich, with stuff and rich with family.

But he was also devout. Following every cookout thrown by his sons, Job would rise early in the morning and offer a sacrifice for each one of his children, just in case they'd had too much fun, sinned a little or even somehow cursed God in their hearts. Job always did this because he wanted his children to be right with God because Job was right with God. Job "...was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil." (Job 1:1a) Job is the best person anyone knows. Everybody knows this, even God.

God is psyched about how awesome Job is and says so one day, in the throne room of heaven. It happens during a staff meeting. You may not think about heaven this way but the author of Job did. Lots of the ancients did, including some of the prophets. A heavenly council would meet with God and there were trials. God had a prosecutor, an accuser. Job names him Satan but this was way before Satan was spelled with a capital "S", fell from heaven, grew horns and a tail. This Satan works for God as the Accuser. His job is to go to and fro on the earth, to walk up and down on it and accuse those who were guilty of sin.

Maybe you can see now why this is a divinely inspired creative writing effort. How many of you believe that someone roams around all day trying to catch us in our sins? How many of you believe that same person, "the Accuser," makes regular reports to the Lord in his heavenly throne room? How many of you believe that person, whose name in Hebrew is *Satan*, is on the Lord's payroll? No, that's all unbelievable but again, the author of Job is trying to work through the problem of evil and so this is what he imagines even as he presents himself as a court reporter, overhearing and reporting on the conversation he heard in heaven. It goes this way.

One day, when the heavenly council meets and the Lord gets an update on their activity of earth, "The Lord said to Satan, "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." (Job 1:8) He is honest, loyal, devote, the best person anyone knows.

Satan doesn't buy it and says so. "Why do you think he is the best person anyone knows? Do you think he is this way out of devotion

and the goodness of his heart? Not a chance. No one has been so catered to as Job. He has the best of everything. You've protected him, put a fence around him, his family, his belongings. The truth is if you take away all of his security and all of his possession, he will curse you within an Uz minute. No doubt about.

God says, "Okay. We'll see. I'm confident in my boy so I'll let you go ahead and do to him all you want, but don't hurt him." Having gained access to Job's possessions, Satan left the presence of the Lord scheming about the very best person anyone knows and what the worst thing that can happen.

This is how it goes down. One day, Job is just hanging out, thinking about tomorrow's sacrifice because he knows his children are having another one of their famous BBQ's at his eldest son's house. Suddenly, one of his servants comes running into the house in an absolute panic and says, "Job, I've got awful news." "The oxen were plowing and the donkeys were feeding beside them, and the Sabeans fell on them and carried them off, and killed the servants with the edge of the sword; I alone have escaped to tell you." (Job 1:15)

While he was still speaking, another servant rushes in and says, "Job, terrible news." "Lightning fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants, and consumed them; I alone have escaped to tell you." (Job 1: 16) While he was still speaking, a third servant rushes in and says, "Job, I have shocking news. "The Chaldeans formed three columns, made a raid on the camels and carried them off, and killed the servants with the edge of the sword; I alone have escaped to tell you." (Job 1:17) But that wasn't the worst of it because while he was still speaking, a final servant runs in. Crying, he says, "Oh dear, Job, it's a tragedy." "Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother's house, when suddenly a tornado came twisting across the desert, struck the four corners of the house, and it fell on the young people, and they are dead; I alone have escaped to tell you." (Job 1:19)

This is Satan's answer to what the worst thing that can happen to the best person you know. It is the way it went down, all of it happening in one day. Alex has nothing on the terrible, horrible, very bad no good day of Job.

The author of Job writes about four coincidental disasters, all happening at once. Two of them are natural disasters, lighting, and a

tornado and two of them are human-made, theft, and murder. It leaves Job with nothing except his own life, his own home, and a wife who doesn't understand him. Frankly, I don't either because his response to these four tragedies is to tear his robe, shave his head, fall down and worship God. "He said, 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.' In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing." (Job 1:21-22)

That's what Satan imagined was the worst thing that could happen to the best person he knew. But it wasn't enough to get him to curse God so the next time the heavenly court was in session, God says to Satan, "Well, how about my boy Job? He's the real deal, isn't he? "...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." (Job 2:3)

Satan still doesn't buy Job's faithfulness. "Anyone will give up everything to save his life. But if you let me put my hand on him, he will curse you to your face." God again says, "We'll see. Do what you must but whatever you do, don't kill him."

So Satan left the throne room of heaven scheming again about the best person anyone knew and the worst that could ever happen. He decides to inflict him with loathsome sores from the bottom of his feet to the crown of his head. Painful ulcers and scabs all over his body. The itching was so unbearable that Job took a piece of broken pottery, found a pile of ashes outside his home and begins scraping himself, seeking relief from his misery. To add to his pain and suffering, Job's wife comes to him and says, "You and your integrity are pathetic. Just, "Curse God, and die. But he said to her, 'You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?' In all this Job did not sin with his lips." (Job 2: 9b-10) Wow, he has even lost the support of his wife. Everything is gone, even his health and still, Job did not curse God.

A remarkable thing happens. Three of Job's friends show up and they do what friends need to do in such a tragic time. They sit with him for a full week without saying a thing. They couldn't understand why bad things happen to good people and even if they could, it wouldn't take away the pain or the grief. Even if those three friends could have explained exactly why Job had lost his ten children, (which they later tried to do) it wouldn't bring them back again. The truth is we don't

know why bad things happen to good people, and the suggestions we offer usually aren't very helpful. But to sit with someone who is suffering, simply sit and share in that person's pain, is often the best thing any of us can do. <sup>4</sup>

So we come to the end of our first act of this year's Bible beach read. Job is on the ash pile contemplating everything that has happened to him. He has discovered that life is a combination of good and evil, blessing and pain, bad days and good days. Job had just experienced some very bad days that brought him incredible horror and pain. Remarkably, he had not lost sight of goodness. He will need that perspective as he moves forward and uses the fertilizer of his experiences for spiritual transformation.

Still, we are left with the question. Who is the best person you know? What is the worst that could happen? For those of us who believe in Jesus no one has ever been better than he was, and nothing worse could have happened than what happened to him. The story of Job has nothing on Jesus' story, and yet we believe that somehow God was at work in history to show his love and save his people.

The problem of evil and suffering ultimately offers no clear theoretical solution. But Christians can at least point to the cross and says that practically speaking, there is no evil so dark and so obscene—not even this—but that God can turn it to good."<sup>5</sup>

Hold on to that because, like Job, the way things go down in a world like ours, you will need it.

---

<sup>1</sup> Larrimore, Mark. The Book of "Job": A Biography (Lives of Great Religious Books) (pp. 12-13). Princeton University Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>2</sup> Somerville, Jim. Back Roads of the Bible: Job. First Baptist Richmond, VA. October 7, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> <https://biblereadingarcheology.com/2016/04/14/where-was-the-land-of-uz/>.

<sup>4</sup> Somerville, Jim.

<sup>5</sup> Buechner, Frederick. "Evil". Originally published in Wishful Thinking. <http://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2016/10/9/evil>