

The People's Bible

Lent Course

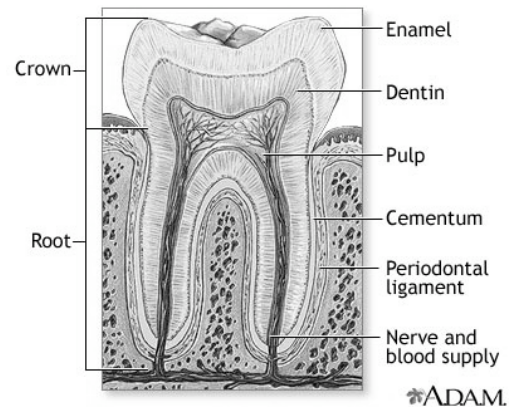
By the skin of your teeth/Gird your loins

Questions: What do these phrases mean to you?

Can you think of some situations where they might be used?

Have you ever used any of them? (If you are in a group, it is fine to not share what the situation was if you prefer).

Look at the pictures and poems below.



Questions: Which one(s), for you, best illustrate the sayings 'by the skin of your teeth' and 'gird your loins'?

Is there a picture, poem, piece of music, song or film that is not here that would illustrate the sayings better for you?

Read: Job 19.13-22, both in the King James and in a modern version.

Questions: What do you like about the reading?

What don't you like?

What don't you understand?

Is there anything you wish was put differently? Why?

Do you prefer the King James version or the modern one you are using?

About Job

Job belongs in the part of the Old Testament that is known as Wisdom Literature. Other Wisdom books include Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs. This means that these texts are not so concerned with history but are reflections on other aspects of human experience. The key question that the book of Job reflects on is the problem of why good or righteous people suffer. Connected to this are other questions such as how a righteous sufferer should behave when confronted with undeserved suffering and how it is possible to continue as a believer in an evil world. There is no clear resolution to this problem in Job, perhaps rather like there is no obvious answer to these issues in real life.

Job is a story with a moral and should be read as such. It begins by introducing Job, a prosperous family man living in a land called Uz. We are told in Job 1.1 that Job was a man who was perfect, upright, who feared God and rejected evil. The reader of Job is given a glimpse of what book's author believed the heavenly court might be like. Among the heavenly beings who serve God is a character named as 'the satan'. It is important to remember that here the word 'satan' refers to a role and not to a devil figure. The definite article (the word 'the') appears in the original Hebrew though rarely translated into English so it is easy to miss this point. The satan is here a kind of heavenly prosecutor whose role is to test the righteousness and faithfulness of people on earth and on God's behalf! The satan is given the go-ahead to test out Job with the proviso that Job himself must not be hurt (1.12). Job is stripped of everything (except his critical wife). His family are killed in a freak accident and his livestock are either stolen or killed. Job stands fast and does not blame God. "I was born with nothing, and I will die with nothing. The Lord gave, and now he has taken away. May his name be praised." (1.21) The satan goes back to God, reports on Job's response and asks to test Job further. Again, permission is given, this time with the proviso that Job himself must not be killed. Job comes out in sores, goes to sit on a rubbish heap and scrapes his sores with pieces of broken pottery. His wife questions his faithfulness, "why don't you curse God and die?" (2.9) Still Job says nothing against God.

Three of Job's friends hear of Job's misfortune and much of the book is taken up by the conversation that takes place between Job and Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. Their view is that somehow Job must have sinned to deserve such misfortune. Job still stands firm recognising that his misfortune must originate from God and is convinced of his innocence. This continues for much of the book. Another character, Elihu, a young bystander speaks defending God. The book concludes with a response to Job from God where the author images God reflecting on the experience of being God and how this is outside of Job's experience. However, at the end of the book Job is vindicated and the friends are criticised. Finally, Job is blessed with more livestock, seven sons and three daughters, and lives to a great age. (42.17)

In theological terms, the issue Job deals with is that of *theodicy*. The term theodicy was coined by the philosopher Gottfried Leibnitz and is derived from the Greek words *theos* (god) and *dike* (justice). Theodicy explores how a loving, good God can exist when there is evil in the world. This question was brought into focus during the European age of enlightenment although had been tentatively explored earlier. The presence of evil presents a major challenge to the Christian understanding of the world. Theodicy is both a subject within theology and is used to describe particular solutions offered to the problem of evil.

The philosopher Epicurus (341-270 BCE) via Hick comments,
"If God is perfectly good, he must want to abolish all evil; if he is unlimitedly powerful, he must be able to abolish all evil: but evil exists; therefore either God is not perfectly good or he is not unlimitedly powerful." (1985)

Bishop and theologian Augustine developed a Christian response to this problem in the fifth century. Augustine's writings have been a major influence in the development of Christian thought. Thomas Aquinas, another key theologian in the history of the church, observed that the two main obstacles to Christian belief are the reality of evil and the impossibility of objectively proving God's existence. Many other theologians, not to mention many, many ordinary people, have wrestled with this issue since.

Question: Can the presence of evil in the world be reconciled with the existence of a God who is unlimited both in goodness and in power? (Hick, 1985)

How do you define 'evil'?

Are there types of evil?

Do you believe in the existence of a devil figure?

There are some who consider that theodicy is sacrilegious - that it is wrong to attempt to judge and justify God. Is it wrong to judge God's dealings with humankind? What do you think?

Is there any relationship between evil, sin and temptation?

- what is sin?

- what is temptation?

Would the 'problem' of evil exist in the same way if God was not good?

Read: 1 Kings 18.41-19.5, both in the King James and in a modern version.

Questions: What do you like about the reading?

What don't you like?

What don't you understand?

Is there anything you wish was put differently? Why?

Do you prefer the King James version or the modern one you are using?

About the Passage

Jezebel is remembered as being Elijah's nemesis! Elijah is remembered as being one of the great prophets in Israelite history; one who was a lone voice speaking out against the unfaithful relationship the people (and most particularly their kings) with the God of Israel. In particular, Elijah opposed the worship of Baal and Asherah, god and goddess worshipped in the neighbouring nation of Tyre whose cult was slipping over the border into Israelite territory. Tyre and Israel were close politically since Ahab, King of Israel was married to Jezebel of Tyre. Jezebel brought her own gods with her building a temple to Baal in Samaria. 1 Kings 16.33 tells us that Ahab "did more to provoke the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than had all the kings of Israel who were before him." Ahab "served Baal a little" (II Kings 10.18) although did continue to offer worship to his own God too.

It is no surprise that Elijah came to blows with Ahab and more particularly, Jezebel! Ahab is passive in much of the story reacting to events as they unfold. In many ways, for Ahab, it is simply too much bother to resist and he is blown too and fro between the actions of his wife and of the prophet.

At the opening of the passage we have read, Elijah advises Ahab to eat as the weather forecast is grim and rain is on the way. Elijah climbs Mt Carmel and at the summit asks his servant to look out towards the sea. On the seventh look, the servant notices a tiny cloud and is despatched to suggest to Ahab that he travel to Jezreel before the rain makes the route impassible. Meanwhile, Elijah girds up his loins and runs to Jezreel ahead of Ahab. We next learn how Ahab had brought Jezebel up to date with events and that Elijah had been responsible for the death of 450 prophets of Baal. Jezebel is furious and goes after Elijah. Elijah flees in fear of his life. That Elijah had got to Jezreel first meant that he was able to escape, we might imagine, before the arrival of Ahab and Jezebel and perhaps more significantly, their accompanying armies.

Elijah girds up his loins and runs.

Questions: Is this how we use the phrase 'gird up your loins'?

Have you ever (or been tempted) to run away from something or someone threatening you?

When is it a good idea to run away?

When is it not such a good idea?

Elijah was attempting to run away from God and the place within his people he had been called to. Is it possible to run away from God?

Did Elijah have any choice as to whether he should run away?

The phrase 'gird up your loins' might be interpreted to imply something about the need to travel light in life. Lent is a time of self-examination where we are invited to consider what is in our lives and what might we carry no more.

- What sort of things do people hold onto that aren't helpful to them?
- Why is it sometimes so hard to let go?

It is finished!

This session is the final installment of **The People's Bible** Lent Course. Some general questions to conclude:

What have you enjoyed most about these sessions?

What hasn't been so good?

Have you learned anything new,

- about God?
- about the Bible?
- about people in general?
- about yourself?

Is there anything covered that you would like to have learned more about?

Would you consider attending a programme like this in the future?

If you have been using this material online, it would be helpful to hear particular feedback about how this has worked for you, whether you would be interested in taking part in a study course in this way again in the future?

Please feel free to contact me on [sarah.moore\(AT\)nwsynod.org.uk](mailto:sarah.moore(AT)nwsynod.org.uk) [please substitute @ for (AT)] if you would like to offer any particular feedback or if there have been any issues concerning this course you feel would be helpful for me to consider.

Many thanks.