

R. Herbert



JOB

*Answering
the Question
of Suffering*

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By R. Herbert

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About Our Books

Introduction

Pain, problems, and suffering affect all of us. Sometimes we suffer as a result of mistakes we make, and at times like that, our suffering is – to some degree or another – often our own fault (1 Peter 4:15). But at other times, the suffering we encounter in life may not be our fault at all (1 Peter 4:16).

And when we do suffer – especially when we feel we suffer through no fault of our own – our happiness, our peace of mind, and even our faith can be challenged. In severe cases, we may come to the point where we feel suffering has taken over our lives and destroyed even our desire to live. But whether our pain is moderate or intense, short-term or long-lasting, there is a book that can help us make sense of the suffering we experience and bring us a remarkable degree of hope. That book is the biblical book of Job.

The Old Testament book of Job (pronounced “jōb”) is an unforgettable account of an upright and righteous man who suffers intensely. Job endures the sudden loss of all his children and his wealth, followed by ongoing suffering from painful skin sores. And that, as we will see, is just the beginning of his suffering!

If you have ever suffered, are suffering now, or if grief and trials of some kind come to you in the future, the story of Job is your story. The lessons he learned before his suffering ended and he was restored are invaluable ones that can profoundly help you to cope with suffering and to help others who suffer, too.

This fact is especially important for Christians as Jesus foretold that his followers would inevitably suffer (John 16:33, see also 2 Timothy 3:12). In today’s world, the persecution of Christians is rampant; many suffer the ravages of war or other problems; and many endure suffering in health, financial, and other areas of life. But whatever the cause of our affliction or that of others, the story of Job can be a true inspiration and a lasting help. The book you are about to read will show you how.

1. Who Was Job?

Millions of people who have never read the Bible have heard of the biblical character Job and phrases such as “Righteous Job,” “The patience of Job,” or “Job’s comforters.” But even regular readers of the Scriptures – familiar as they may be with the story of Job and his sufferings – know little at all about Job himself. Who was Job – and was he even a real person?

To answer the second question first – we do not know. While many Bible readers assume Job was indeed a real person (that is the perspective of this book) it is also possible that the story of Job is a kind of ancient parable – an inspired examination of the question of suffering built on a character who personified the misfortunes and pain that many people go through in this life.

That the story of Job has a literary basis is possibly indicated by the fact that there were other, somewhat similar, stories of suffering individuals in the great ancient civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia, and that in the Hebrew Bible, the book of Job was included in the “writings” or “literature” section, along with books such as Psalms and Proverbs rather than with the more obviously historical books of the “prophets” such as Judges, Samuel and Kings.

The story itself begins with a kind of “once upon a time in a place far away” introduction that often marks literary rather than factual writing, and certain aspects of the story – such as the Satan’s conversations with God in heaven – appear to be of a literary nature: how could they have been actual recorded conversations? In fact, the speeches of Job, his three friends, and of God found in the book, are all in poetic form.

On the other hand, the 6th-century BC prophet Ezekiel seems to write about Job as an actual man (Ezekiel 14:14), as does the apostle James in the New Testament (James 5:11).

But whether Job was an actual person, or a literary character

servicing as a type of all who suffer, the Bible itself tells us very little about him. The truth is, we know far more about Job's character than his identity or history. Yet historical and archaeological scholarship can offer us some valuable insights into the story of righteous Job – such as where and when the story is set.

We do not know the identity of Job's homeland, called "the land of Uz," although some details in the story could indicate southern Edom or northern Arabia.

On the other hand, it seems clear that the events described in the book of Job took place very early in patriarchal history. We can see this from a number of clues in the book itself – which tells us that Job lived for 140 years after the events it describes (42:16), giving Job a total lifespan of some 200 years. This seemingly impossible figure fits in with the recorded ages of the early patriarchs mentioned in the Bible – such as Abraham, who, for example, is said to have lived 175 years (Genesis 25:7–8).

There are other clues that support a very early date for the setting of Job. The book contains no reference or allusion to Israel, the tabernacle, or the Mosaic law, and the social and religious aspects it describes are characteristic of the patriarchal age. For example, Job's great wealth is measured not in terms of silver or gold, but in terms of the livestock he owned (1:3; 42:12) as was usually the case in patriarchal times (e.g. Genesis 13:2,5; 30:43).

The book of Job uses the name "Shaddai" ("The Almighty") for God – as was the case in patriarchal times (Genesis 17:1; etc.); and just like Abraham and his immediate descendants (Genesis 22:13; etc.) Job functioned as a priest, offering sacrifices for his own family (1:5).

Finally, archaeology has shown that the name Job was not infrequent in the Near East in the second millennium BC and a prince called Job appears in ancient Egyptian documents of the 19th-century BC. These and other small details not only place the story in patriarchal times, but also are consistent with a narrative written in those times rather than one written about them later. That is why the book of Job is sometimes regarded as being possibly

one of the oldest books in the Bible – written before the books of Moses that begin our Bible today.

The Hebrew text of Job has many archaic spellings and a large number of words and grammatical forms not found elsewhere in the Bible. This led the 12th century Jewish scholar Ibn Ezra to conclude that the book may have been originally written in some other language and later translated into Hebrew, though some modern scholars believe that the foreign words and forms may have been purposefully used to heighten the sense of a foreign location for the story. This scenario seems unlikely to other scholars, but once again, we do not know.

All in all, the origins of the book of Job are as mysterious as its namesake character, though it is clear that the book was accepted into the canon of the Hebrew Scriptures and later the Christian Bible as an inspired and unique study of human suffering – one that can truly help those who suffer today, as we will see.

2. The Suffering of Job

As we read the story of Job, we find that in the trials that came upon him Job lost everything. We may know that intellectually, but how much do we truly understand the level of loss that is described? First, Job lost virtually all of his possessions. If that were everything Job lost, he might well have felt that his world had collapsed around him, yet it was only the beginning of his troubles.

Next, Job lost his family – every one of his many children. He did not physically lose his wife, but her attitude toward him changed and any support and encouragement that he might have received from her was gone. Then, in rapid succession, Job lost his health, his dignity, his sense of self-worth, his friends, and above all, he felt he had lost his relationship with God.

These losses – of virtually everything Job held dear or had in life – add up to be a truly horrendous level of affliction. Job was in continuous physical pain in addition to suffering the psychological, emotional, and spiritual pain that came from his losing everything. Consider these afflictions for a moment:

Physical affliction: Job developed and suffered from excruciatingly painful and disfiguring boils or sores that covered him from head to foot so that he could not sit, stand, or lie in any position comfortably, and forcing him to sit in ashes and scrape himself.

Emotional affliction: Job's own wife was unsupportive, telling him to "Curse God and die" (2:9), and his closest friends misjudged and condemned him, presuming he had brought his suffering on himself.

Psychological affliction: Job's loss of the support of even those closest to him doubtless caused him to experience intense feelings of alienation, loneliness, self-doubt, and shame.

Spiritual affliction: Job's knowledge that he had not sinned grievously, yet was apparently being punished or ignored by God, caused him great anguish. It was only natural that spiritually he would be plagued with doubts of God's fairness and love.

Any one of these areas of affliction would have been a severe trial for someone to endure, but it is hard to imagine just how terrible the combination of all of them would be. In fact, the intense levels of loss and affliction suffered by Job are matched in the biblical account only by those suffered by Jesus Christ. In that sense, the sufferings of Job foreshadowed and mirrored Christ's sufferings and can help us better understand them as we look closely at Job's experience.

Although the situations of Job and Jesus were different in a number of important ways, the parallels are obvious. Jesus also lost his possessions – even his clothes were stripped from him (Matthew 27:28). He lost his family's support (Mark 3:21); his friends (Matthew 26:56); his physical well-being (John 19:1); his dignity (Matthew 27:29-30); and even, ostensibly, his relationship with God (Matthew 27:46). Jesus, of course, knew why he was suffering, and reacted perfectly to what he endured, but without minimizing Christ's suffering in any way, the parallels with what Job went through are still worth thinking about.

Job's suffering was, indeed, as intense as one could imagine – and it was not over quickly. Although we are told that Job lost his wealth and his children in the calamities of a single day, the book does not explicitly state how long Job's suffering lasted. The book speaks of a second meeting between God and Satan at some time after the first, when God then gave permission for further afflictions to be poured on Job. His friends had to travel some distance to come to him, then sat silently with him for a whole week before they even began to speak – and we do not know over how many days their speeches and Job's rebuttals were made. Job himself mentions “months of futility” (7:3) that he had undergone, and referred to his previous condition in “months past” (29:2 NKJV),

suggesting that his affliction lasted at least a number of months and possibly a year or longer. Some scholars even think Job's trials should be understood as having lasted as long as two years.

So, Job experienced both sudden overwhelming suffering, and what must have seemed like endless lasting pain. It is not surprising that in the New Testament the apostle James (the brother of Jesus) points specifically to Job in the context of suffering and calls him a model of perseverance, as we will see. James probably used Job as an example of patience in suffering because of the intensity of the persecution the Christian Church was already undergoing in his time. After the execution of Jesus, the deacon Stephen was martyred (Acts 7) and many Christians fled from Jerusalem because of the mounting persecution they were experiencing (Acts 7-9). By the time James wrote his epistle, around the middle of the first century, James the brother of John had also been killed, and the apostle Peter had narrowly escaped trial and doubtless execution (Acts 12).

The early Christians were suffering intensely and in many ways during this time, and encouragement under suffering was thus a major theme of James' letter. In fact, suffering is the first thing James speaks of as he begins his epistle: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds" (James 1:2). In the fifth chapter of his epistle, he encourages those who suffer:

Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy" (James 5:10-11).

The apostle chose to use the example of Job in this context to remind the early Christians that – like Job – although they had done nothing to deserve persecution, and were suffering unjustly,

they could find hope in the exercise of patient endurance and the knowledge that – again like Job – God would eventually vindicate and reward them because of their suffering (James 1:12).

The situation is no different today. In a world in which the persecution of Christians continues to grow, and in the individual suffering many endure in health, economic, and other areas of life, the encouragement we can find in the book of Job is as important as ever. But before we begin to look to the positive lessons of Job, we must consider another aspect of his trials.

3. Job On Trial

It is easy to read the book of Job and not realize that it is not only a book about Job's physical, emotional and spiritual trials, but also about *legal trials*. The book of Job is actually full of legal language – for example, Elihu tells Job “But now you are laden with the judgment due the wicked; judgment and justice have taken hold of you” (36:17). The Hebrew words translated “judgement,” “wicked,” and “justice” in this statement are all formal legal terms that were used in ancient trials. In the same way, important verses in the book speak of an “accuser” (1:6 NLT), “judge” (9:15), “mediator” (9:33), “witness” (16:19), and “redeemer” (19:25) – all of whom played specific roles in legal trials.

In fact, when we look closely, we find that the whole book of Job consists of a great legal trial. Beginning with the opening of the book, we find that Satan brings charges against Job – suggesting to God that Job's character holds hidden or potential sin. God agrees to examine the charges, and once the trial commences Job's three friends serve as witnesses for the prosecution. Job rebuts the false evidence brought by the friends, and brings his own counter-charges against them and even against God!

The mysterious Elihu then enters the trial to represent God and cross-examine Job, and finally, God himself enters the trial and passes judgment on the situation. Understanding this legal dimension of the book of Job helps us to more fully grasp and appreciate its message, so we will look at this legal dimension of the story a little more closely before moving on to other aspects of the book.

The Friends

Israelite law, along with the laws of a number of other ancient cultures, stipulated that legal charges could only be brought against

an individual by two or three witnesses, and the three friends fulfill that requirement in Job's trial. Their role as "witnesses" to Job's supposed sins in chapters 4-23 is seen in that they all accuse Job of wrongdoing, and all agree that Job is guilty. But this is based not on observation, but on presumption. The friends all presume the same thing – that Job is suffering, so Job must have sinned. In this sense the friends are not only witnesses, but are also, unknowingly, false witnesses.

Yet the friends play a vital role in Job's story in stating a view of sin and suffering that the book ultimately argues against. The book of Job also rejects the natural corollary of this view – that if we do not admit to having sinned when we suffer, we ultimately accuse God of unrighteousness. As Job's friend Eliphaz says, "Can mortal man be more righteous than God?" and the word "righteous" he uses meant being "on the right side of the law" in legal contexts.

Job

Job flatly denies the friends' accusations, asserting his innocence and using legal language and procedures in his defense. The legal nature of his remarks is immediately obvious in chapter 9 as Job begins his defense by complaining that he has no way to justify himself before God: "Though I were innocent, I could not answer him; I could only plead with my Judge for mercy. Even if I summoned him and he responded, I do not believe he would give me a hearing" (9:15-16). For, Job says, "If it is a matter of justice, who can challenge him?" (9:19). And, of his friends, Job complained "I know you will not acquit me. Since I will be found guilty, why should I struggle in vain?" (9:28-29 CSB).

As a result, Job finally is forced to justify himself with the most powerful legal procedure available in ancient Near-Eastern cultures – the oath of innocence. In ancient Babylonian, Hittite, Hebrew, and some other cultures, if an accused person uttered the oath of innocence the individual was automatically exonerated. The oath was sworn to the individual's god, and affirmed that the person had

not done the wrong they were accused of, while binding on themselves a severe curse for the crime if they were not innocent. Similarly, in ancient Egyptian mythology, an oath of innocence or “Negative Confession” was included in Spell 125 of the so-called Book of the Dead (c. 1500-1350 BC). This multiple-part oath did not call for curses on the individual if they had sinned, but forcefully stated their innocence regarding some forty-two sins.

In the book of Job, Job's oath of innocence is also lengthy – actually taking up the greater part of chapter 31. The oath is structured as a series of conditional statements, in which Job lists a number of sins and declares that he has not committed any of them. Each statement follows the same pattern: the description of a sin and Job's statement of his innocence in that regard, followed by the calling down of a curse upon himself if he is lying. The form is a standard judicial one – “If X is the crime, Y is the penalty.”

The oath is a profound legal declaration of Job's innocence in the face of the accusations leveled against him and he ends his oath by saying “I sign now my defense – let the Almighty answer me; let my accuser put his indictment in writing” (31:35). The use of legal terminology is inescapable and leaves no doubt that the book of Job is indeed a trial in which Job gives a final summation of his defense, then rests his case to wait for God's verdict.

Elihu

It is at this point, after Job rests his case, that Elihu enters the story and, after rebuking the three friends for their inaccurate witness, he proceeds to analyze Job's situation and to then point out problems in Job's arguments. Elihu states that the problem is not that Job had sinned earlier (the argument of the three friends) but that he was now wrongly accusing God of unfairness, and was thus legally liable.

As we will see, Elihu appears to legally represent God in this final stage of the trial (chapters 32–37); and this would seem to be his role which ends when God himself enters the proceedings.

God

We saw that at the end of his defense, Job insisted “let the Almighty answer me” (31:35) and that is, of course, what happens. God himself speaks to Job, examining him “out of the whirlwind” (38:1 CSB), and completely annihilating Job’s arguments regarding God’s supposed unfairness. We will see how God does this later in this book, but it is clear that God functions as the judge in this last scene of the trial. He rejects the charges previously brought against Job but institutes new charges.

Everything builds to the climactic moment of the trial when, after Job’s repentant reply, God acquits him. God’s verdict includes not only a reprimand for the errors of the friends, but also the full restitution of Job’s health, family, and wealth. In this way, the book highlights the fact that justice has finally been served, and that the legal, moral and ethical issues raised in the trial have been resolved.

Yet although the book of Job is certainly the story of a legal trial, the book is also more than that. In the following chapters we will look more closely at the role Job’s friends and Elihu play in the book, before turning to the role of God himself.

4. Job's Friends

After Job begins his period of suffering, we read that three of his friends – Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite – travelled from distant regions to come to comfort him. While this sounds good and the friends were clearly concerned for Job, the situation soon deteriorated.

Just as Job himself is synonymous with suffering, the three friends who came to console him are synonymous with help that is not real help. We speak of “Job’s comforters” meaning people who are no help or comfort in a difficult situation. Job himself reminded his friends “For the despairing man there should be kindness from his friend” (6:14 NASB), sadly, however, Job’s friends ended up making his life even more miserable, spoke some things that were not true, and eventually earned a rebuke from God himself (42:7-9).

At first, the friends sat with Job in shocked silence – overwhelmed by his catastrophic situation they said nothing for seven days (2:13). Then, after Job finally poured out a bitter complaint for what had happened to him, the three friends all, in turn, gave three long speeches which – together with Job’s replies to each of them – comprise a great deal of the book.

Sadly, the friends’ speeches became increasingly critical of Job. Their statements about children who do wrong or who suffer for their parents’ wrongdoing (5:4; 8:4; 21:19; etc.) were doubtless especially painful to Job who had just lost his own children (1:18-19). Given both the reactions of Job and of God to the speeches of the friends, it’s hard to not presume that their words were all reprehensible, and not to reject most or all of what they say. But that should not necessarily be the case. Our reaction to much of what the friends said is understandably colored by Job’s retorts to them throughout the book. Job certainly had a way with words, and he often replied to the accusations of his friends with expressions such as “Doubtless ... wisdom will die with you!” (12:2),

and “If only you would be altogether silent! For you, that would be wisdom” (13:5).

It is easy to think that in saying these things Job is rejecting everything the friends say. But if we look closer, that is really not the case. There are other occasions where he credits them with telling the truth. Notice just two examples: “Indeed, I know that this is true” (9:2), “Who does not know all these things?” (12:3). Looking closely at the context shows that Job frequently agreed with his friends and verbally approved what they were saying.

It is only when they drew the wrong conclusions and wrongly accused Job of unrighteousness that he reacted in self-defense, denying what they said. If we look carefully at what God says when he speaks to the friends at the end of the book, we find the same fact. God nowhere decries all that the friends said, he rather states that, in their lack of understanding, they did not speak the truth about God himself (42:7).

But much of what the friends say is good and is paralleled by other verses in the Bible. Compare, for example, Job 5:17 “Blessed is the one whom God corrects; so do not despise the discipline of the Almighty” with Proverbs 3:11 “do not despise the LORD’s discipline, and do not resent his rebuke.” The friends were sincerely concerned for Job and there are important lessons we can learn from them regarding helping those who are suffering.

1. They were attentive.

Although the friends evidently lived at considerable distances from Job, they clearly stayed in touch to the extent that they knew that he was suffering and could use encouragement. We cannot help people if we fail to stay connected and are not attentive to their needs – whether they are friends, co-workers, aged family members, or others. Job’s friends were not so wrapped up in their own lives that they were disconnected from his; they were not too busy to stay in touch and see when he needed them.

2. They got involved.

When they became aware of Job's situation, his friends *acted* on the knowledge. They did not simply pray for Job – right and proper as that would be – they got involved to do what they could do directly. The friends doubtless sacrificed considerable time and energy in traveling to Job from other lands, and they apparently came at once rather than waiting for a convenient time.

3. They coordinated.

Job 2:11 tells us that Job's friends: "met together to go and sympathize with Job and comfort him," or, as the ESV translates this verse: "They made an appointment together to come to show him sympathy and comfort him." The three friends clearly coordinated with each other to help Job. We can learn from this by seeing the value of reaching out to let others know of a person's need and by helping to coordinate visits or help for the individual from different people at different times.

4. They reacted appropriately.

Romans 12:15 tells us to "Mourn with those who mourn," and we are told that when Job's friends saw him "they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads" (2:12). Tearing one's clothes and throwing dust or ashes on oneself was a sign of mourning in the ancient world, and this is what Job himself had done (2:8). Job's friends grieved deeply for him and they expressed their emotions in clear but appropriate ways that helped Job see that they identified with him and his suffering.

5. They stayed with Job.

Despite their failings with words, Job's friends stayed with him for over seven days – theirs was no nominal visit just to offer condolences. We may not always be able to give up extended

periods of time to help others, but the principle of staying with the sufferer means doing things such as continuing to contact them, to see if they need help and to give them ongoing opportunities to talk about their situation. We should notice that even when the friends stopped trying to speak to Job (32:1), they did not leave for home – they stayed and continued sitting with him for some time.

When they were eventually rebuked by God, the three friends did as they were commanded and, once again, we see their desire to do what was right (42:7-9). All in all, Job's friends often acted as true friends should, and their actions are models of helping those who are afflicted. It is only when they spoke that they went astray. They were better friends than they were theologians, and we can learn much from where they went wrong in what they said – as we will see next.

5. ELIHU

Elihu plays a central role in the story of Job, yet he is found only in six chapters (32–37) of the book. As we read Job, Elihu suddenly comes on the scene, as it were, out of nowhere: “Elihu son of Barakel the Buzite, of the family of Ram, became very angry with Job for justifying himself rather than God” (32:2). Apparently, Elihu had been present while Job’s friends argued with the patriarch (32:11). But after the three friends finish their criticisms of Job, Elihu speaks and then is not mentioned again.

In the last part of the book, God vindicates Job and condemns the words of Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar (42:7-8), but God says nothing about Elihu. In fact, in speaking to Job, God uses some of the same arguments Elihu used – leaving us to wonder who Elihu was, and what the role was that he had played.

We are certainly given very little information to help us understand this mysterious character and his role. His family name is given, but this does not tell us anything. In Hebrew, Elihu’s own name means “Yahu is God,” or “He Is My God,” but this seems to have been a fairly common name as it is found elsewhere in the Old Testament, including that of an individual listed in the genealogy of the prophet Samuel, and another man who was a warrior of King David.

In a culture where age is equated with experience and wisdom, we are told that Elihu is young (32:4, 6), and perhaps this is the reason he waits and speaks after Job’s friends, deferring to the older men. But the mention of his youth may indicate that Elihu’s wisdom is perhaps unusual or ultimately from some other source. Elihu tells Job “Bear with me a little longer and I will show you that there is more to be said in God’s behalf. I get my knowledge from afar; I will ascribe justice to my Maker” (36:2-3).

It is also clear that Elihu is angry – something that is mentioned three times (32:2, 3, 5) – and we find that Elihu has a great deal of advice for Job (33:12; etc.) although he begins by humbly stating that he will offer Job his opinion (32:10, 17). Most importantly, the criticism Elihu offers Job is very different from that leveled by Job’s three friends. Overall, we can summarize the accusations of the three friends as follows:

Bildad: “Job has sinned” in the past (8:5-6).

Zophar: “Job has sinned” in the past (11:6).

Eliphaz: “Job has sinned” in the past (22:5).

But we find that Elihu does not ever fault Job for real or imagined sins in his past behavior. Instead, Elihu argues forcibly that “Job sins” in the present (34:37). While the three friends all presume and claim that before Job began suffering, he must have sinned in some way to have brought misfortune on himself, Elihu’s accusation is different.

Essentially, Elihu says: “Since you began suffering, you have been sinning.” Notice that the story tells us that all the way through Job’s calamities – till directly before his friends arrived – “In all this, Job did not sin *in what he said*” (2:10). It is only after the friends’ arrival, and Job’s replies to them, that he began to speak wrongfully.

So, most importantly, while the three friends concern themselves with Job’s suspected past misconduct, Elihu concerns himself only with Job’s present speech. We can see the difference in the charges they bring. Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar have no evidence, only presumption. That is why we are told Elihu was “angry with the three friends, because they had found no way to refute Job, and yet had condemned him” (32:3). Elihu, however, constantly brings specific evidence to support his charges of wrongful speech: “You say...You say...You say...You say...” (33:8-11; 33:13; 34:5-6; 35:2-3; 36:23).

While Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar give three speeches each – with the speeches growing shorter as they progress – Job refutes every speech of the three friends with speeches of his own. Elihu then gives four speeches, but Job cannot or does not argue against what Elihu has said.

The empathy and sincerity of Elihu are certainly clear in his words. He assures Job that his intent is not to attack him (33:7), and that he seeks to justify Job (33:32). Elihu's words of correction are given more gently compared to the accusations of the three friends. In fact, Elihu claims to be motivated by the spirit of God, and to speak on God's behalf, (32:8; 36:2-3). That what Elihu says in his speeches is true is seen in the fact we mentioned earlier – that when God later speaks to Job, we find Elihu's arguments are, in fact, virtually identical to those God makes. Compare these examples: Elihu justifies Job from all charges of previous sin (33:32), but he accuses Job of:

finding fault with God (33:9-11),
speaking without knowledge (34:35),
justifying himself rather than God (32:2),
putting God in the wrong (34:5-6, 36:23).

After God speaks with Job and the patriarch repents in dust and ashes (42:6) God clears Job (42:7-8). But before this repentance, God calls Job:

a faultfinder (40:2),
who speaks without knowledge (38:2),
who justifies himself rather than God (40:2, 8),
who puts God in the wrong (40:8).

Exactly the same things Elihu said. So, it is not surprising that many scholars feel that Elihu must have been (or represents in the story) a servant of God who served as a witness to the mistaken complaints that Job was uttering. In any case, Elihu's four speeches

contain truths helpful for any innocent sufferer, and lessons for us all.

When the book eventually closes – with Job’s friends corrected and Job both vindicated and restored by God – we find that Elihu played a central role in this profound story of suffering and restoration. Although – mysterious as ever – Elihu is nowhere to be seen at the story’s end, his words may be compared with those God speaks and help us understand some of the most important lessons of the book of Job, as we shall see next.

6. Job And God

It is easy to read the book of Job and not notice that in the first two chapters of the book, God is referred to by the name translated “the LORD” (Hebrew *Yahweh*). But beginning in the third chapter, we find Job’s three friends, as well as Elihu, never use this personal name for God. Instead, they refer to him as “God” (Hebrew *El*, *Eloha*, or *Elohim*), or as “the Almighty” (Hebrew *El Shaddai*). Then, in the final chapters, where only God and Job speak, we find that God is referred to again as “the LORD” – that is, as *Yahweh*.

All told, *Yahweh*, the personal covenant name of God, occurs twenty-four times in the book. It is used eleven times in the prologue and twelve times in the epilogue. Beyond the beginning and ending of the book, the only other place the name *Yahweh* occurs is its use by Job in his claim that ultimately, all his suffering is from the LORD (12:9).

While this may seem like an insignificant detail, it is not. The book of Job carefully uses the personal covenant name of God to separate the outer framework of the book from the inner story, and to help show that the relationship between Job and God was a personal one. Job’s connection with God was, indeed, a deep and intense one. We can see the heartfelt nostalgia and loneliness Job felt after his trials overwhelmed him, when he said:

“How I long for the months gone by, for the days when God watched over me, when his lamp shone on my head and by his light I walked through darkness! Oh, for the days when I was in my prime, when God’s intimate friendship blessed my house, when the Almighty was still with me”(29:2-5).

The close relationship Job felt with God was the underlying reason for his frustration and inability to understand what had happened to him. As a result, Job longed for someone to mediate between him

and God, to restore the friendship with God he had felt: “I need someone to mediate between God and me as a person mediates between friends” (16:21 NLT).

Reading these words of Job as Christians today, it is difficult to grasp how cut off from God Job felt. Without the knowledge we have – that Christ, the Son of God, mediates with God for us when we sin, or are in need of help – Job must have imagined that the deepest and most central relationship of his life had somehow ended. More than that, knowing he had not sinned as his friends repeatedly suggested, Job must have considered that God was being unfair in suddenly rejecting him for no apparent reason – or even that God was, in fact, the initiator of Job’s suffering. That Job felt that way is seen in verses such as these: “As surely as God lives, who has denied me justice, the Almighty, who has made my life bitter” (27:1) and “I cry out to you, God, but you do not answer ... you merely look at me. You turn on me ruthlessly; with the might of your hand you attack me (30:20-21).

Yet despite feeling rejected and unfairly punished by God, Job maintained his faith that God could help him – if God would only hear his cries. Despite the seeming silence of God, Job did not turn from him, but kept talking to his Maker. At first, Job almost stoically accepted his suffering, but as time progressed and Job was worn down, he began to complain to God, plead with him, and finally challenge him to step forward and justify his cause against Job: “let God weigh me in honest scales” Job says, “and he will know that I am blameless” (31:6).

The reader of Job knows that God was fully aware of Job’s righteousness – he had already declared Job “blameless and upright” at the book’s beginning (1:1,8), and we see in retrospect that is why God chose him to be tested as he was. But when God does finally enter the story, he never does explain why he allowed Job to suffer so terribly and for so long. Instead, as we will see in the next chapter, God takes Job on a “virtual tour” of his creation and points to some of the varied expressions of his wisdom and power – essentially asking Job “can you really grasp what I do, how

I do it, and for what purpose?” (38-39).

Understandably, after God’s questioning, Job replies “I am so insignificant. How can I answer you? I place my hand over my mouth” (40:4 CSB). Job had come to see just how limited his own understanding was, and that God has purposes far beyond our realization. Although Job knew God, and God was the central part of his life, Job came to see the Creator in a much clearer way. That is why, as the book draws to its end, Job tells God “My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you” (42:5). This does not mean that Job physically saw God – the book clearly tells us that God simply “spoke to Job out of the storm” (38:1) – rather that Job came to understand God more as he really is.

In the book’s epilogue (chapter 42), God tells Job’s three friends that they were wrong – that their ideas about God were too simple and not in harmony with the infinite complexity of his creation, his wisdom, and his plans. Then, in an almost surprising vindication, God says that what Job had said about him was actually right (42:7). Although Job had, at times, said things about God that were based on faulty understanding and wrong conclusions, God nevertheless accepted and approved Job’s honest and deep desire to find him and be right with him. The epilogue also tells us of the restitution of Job’s family, wealth, and happiness – a final vindication showing that God not only allowed Job’s trials, but also brought him through them, then lovingly restored to Job what he had allowed to be stripped away.

Ultimately, just as much as it is a story about human suffering, the story of Job is also a story about God, and our view of God can be greatly enhanced by this book. We come to see God not in a simplistic way as being bound by what *seems* to be right, but as having the infinite wisdom that allows him to use any means necessary to teach those who love him what they need to learn, to bless them, and to bring them, before their story is over, much closer to him.

7. The Questions in Job

The book of Job has such a powerful and memorable storyline that it is possible to focus on the story and miss its point. At its heart, Job is a book of questions leading up to answers, but sometimes we do not see the questions for the story – the narrative stream of events: righteous Job; God giving Satan permission to afflict him; Job’s troubles; his discussions with his friends; God speaking to Job; and finally, Job’s restoration.

We see this story-stream, but we don’t always focus on the questions in the stream. Yet when we look closely at the questions in Job, we can see the underlying lessons of the book much better because the questions actually provide the structural “skeleton” of the story – they are the “bones” which support the body of the narrative, rather than the other way around.

Starting from the beginning of the story, once the stage is set, the book of Job begins with questions:

- “Where have you come from?” (1:7)
- “Have you considered my servant Job?” (1:8)
- “Does Job fear God for nothing?” (1:9)
- “Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has?” (1:10)

These questions quickly propel us into the story proper, and it is here that Job begins to ask an ongoing string of questions that form the heart of the story. Notice just some of these questions:

- “Why did I not perish at birth, and die as I came from the womb?” (3:11)
- “Why is light given to those in misery, and life to the bitter of soul?” (3:20)
- “Why do you hide your face and consider me an enemy?” (13:24)

– “Why do the wicked live on, growing old and increasing in power?” (21:7)

When we put Job’s questions together in this way, we immediately see a clear pattern: Job asks “Why?” over and over again. In the course of the book Job asks this same question many times as he grapples with his situation. At the heart of Job’s many expressions of “Why?” is the central issue of why God allows him to suffer undeservedly – a question explicitly stated in his words: “I will say to God, Do not condemn me; let me know why you contend against me” (10:2 ESV).

Throughout the central part of the book, Job’s friends also ask questions – all of which are aimed at Job himself. But, one after another, Job – rightly - discounts the speeches of the three friends and returns to his unanswered questions of “Why?”

Finally, at the climax of the story, as we saw in the last chapter, God himself steps into the scene with questions of his own – introduced with the words “Brace yourself like a man and I will question you and you shall answer me” (38:3; 40:7).

Throughout four full chapters God then pummels Job with some seventy questions of his own, (38-41). When we look carefully at God’s questions, we see a pattern, also. God does not ask “Why?” Instead, God proceeds to ask Job “Where?” “When” “What?” “How?” “Which?” and “Who?” along with questions such as “Can you...?” “Have you?” “Did you?” and so on.

But God is not really asking Job for answers to all these questions – he does not give him the opportunity to try to answer them. They are rhetorical questions God knows Job cannot answer. But God’s questions make it clear that Job doesn’t know the answers to the when, where, what, how, and other aspects of God’s works. The clear point of God asking Job every type of question other than “Why?” is to rebuke and teach Job: how can he question *why* God does what he does and allows what he allows, when he clearly does not understand *any* of the aspects of God’s works regarding the inanimate and animate elements of creation?

In other words, God asks Job: Why question the “why?” of my will when you cannot comprehend the “How” or any of the other aspects of what I choose to do? That is why, when God has finished questioning Job, the patriarch exclaims: “You asked, ‘Who is this that obscures my plans without knowledge?’ Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know” (42:3).

Job came to realize that if he is not qualified in any way to comprehend the basic aspects of God’s creation and sustaining of all there is, then he certainly was not qualified to pass judgment on how God directs the events of human lives or allows what he does allow.

This was Job’s epiphany, his moment of understanding at the conclusion of the book’s dialogue when he says to God: “You said, ‘Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me.’ My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes” (42:4-6). Job realized that although he had not done wrong, he still had no reason to question God’s wisdom and judgment in allowing his suffering.

So the questions found throughout the book of Job reveal the true nature of Job’s situation and God’s purposes in letting him suffer. It is in the questions in Job that we find the underlying message of the book and real hope in the suffering we experience in our own lives. But our hope is not in our own questions, rather it lies in the questions God asked Job and asks of all of us when we cannot understand why we are suffering.

It has been said that when we are eventually in the presence of God, all our questions and complaints regarding this life will disappear. This is exactly what Job found and it is true of us also. What we need more than answers to many of the questions in life is often simply to seek God and to live as much as we can in his presence now. The more we live in his presence, the more we find it natural to accept the wisdom of his will – and more often than not our questions do, indeed, disappear.

8. Lessons From Job

In the previous chapters we saw that the book of Job contains a great many lessons that can apply to situations when we, or others, suffer. In this final chapter we will expand on some of the most important lessons that we can take from the book – insights that are both theological and practical, informing both our beliefs and our behavior, our doctrine and daily lives.

The Purpose in Pain

Perhaps the most important single theological lesson found in the book of Job is its rebuttal of the concept of divine retribution. This is the concept followed by Job's three friends – the argument that suffering is caused by sin and Job was suffering, so he must have sinned. This is, of course, circular reasoning. It is the same fallacy exhibited by the disciples when they asked Jesus whether a man was born blind because of his own sin, or that of his parents (John 9:1-2). Even today, Christians sometimes presume that a person's misfortunes may be punishment caused by some sin they have committed.

But the book of Job makes it clear that such reasoning is based on an overly narrow and entirely false view of God and does not properly relate God's wisdom with his compassion and love. We should never try to deny that bad things can and do happen to good people. The book of Job opens by telling us that Job was a blameless, upright man who feared God and turned away from evil – and that was the assessment of God himself (1.8). Job's suffering did not come because he was sinful, but rather *despite* his unwavering obedience and faithfulness to God.

Job shows us that God's reasons for allowing misfortunes to happen to good people may be beyond our view or comprehension, yet they are always based in God's deep love and infinite wisdom,

and according to his purpose for us. In this sense, the story of Job meshes perfectly with the teachings of the New Testament that Christians may suffer for reasons beyond our understanding (John 9:3; etc.), and that the suffering God allows is for a purpose and will ultimately have a reward (1 Peter 3:14; etc.).

Job shows us that even when we are in the midst of terrible suffering, we must never lose our hope in God. Despite his own circumstances and his questioning of God, Job still affirmed “Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him” (13:15), and “when he has tried me, I shall come forth as gold” (23:10, RSV). Even when God seems distant and silent, his presence is still with us and his purpose is being worked out with care. Job teaches us not only to trust God’s wisdom in allowing our present pain, but also to treasure his sovereignty – to accept his will in our lives knowing we will eventually understand and be deeply thankful for his working with us.

The understanding that God works beyond our level of comprehension for his purposes can be a tremendous help in coming to terms with why we or others may be suffering, and can provide meaningful hope in our own situations. But beyond its encouraging theology, the book of Job also contains a great many practical lessons that we can apply in our own lives.

Lessons for Living

Job’s example teaches us many things. First, it instructs us regarding our attitude to the suffering we may endure. Humanly, no matter how sincere and devout we may be, our first reactions to extreme situations are very often not good ones. Job’s amazing level of righteousness is seen in his reaction to losing everything: “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised” (1:21). As time went on, Job did begin to question why his troubles had come upon him, but his attitude of praise toward God

at a time of great personal pain is an example we can all think about.

Even when he was confused and bewildered by what was happening to him and did not know how to reconcile God's love with his own situation, Job had faith and did not let go of God. He was utterly honest in describing his feelings when he could not understand God's actions and when it seemed that God no longer cared for him. Yet he did not turn from God, but sought him in ever more intense ways.

Job's faith was matched by his patient endurance in his suffering. This is the reason James wrote "You have heard of the perseverance of Job" (James 5:11 NKJV). Certainly, Job's patience was wearing thin by the end of his friends' attacks – but who could blame him? As it is, he exhibited remarkable perseverance, and shows us that such patience need not be the same as passiveness. Instead, Job shows that God does accept our earnest prayers offered in faith, and that we should continue to seek God even when it might seem that he does not hear us.

Job's example also guides us in how we should deal with those who misjudge us in our suffering. Although he spoke honestly and rebuffed the charges of his friends, Job was still willing to forgive them their unkind words and to pray for them (42:10). It would have been very easy for Job to hold a grudge against those who condemned him so unjustly, but the book tells us that God ascertained this was not the case before restoring and blessing Job.

Job's friends also teach us many lessons. In chapter four we saw that the friends were concerned for Job and were good examples in many of the things they did. And, as we saw, they did well at first – in remaining silent. If you have ever spent time with a suffering friend or loved one, you know how hard it is to just be there for them without trying to give answers. It can be extremely difficult to just suffer silently with someone as our natural desire is to try to offer an explanation or solution to their pain. Job's friends eventually succumbed to this temptation, and then caused a great deal more harm than good.

There is an important lesson for us in this. Even the most well-intentioned believers sometimes fail their friends by pious-sounding statements such as “try to remember that all things work together for good,” or “God never allows anyone to suffer more than they are able.” While such statements may be true, they are usually not what a suffering person needs to hear and can often appear to be downplaying the person’s suffering. It is always more helpful (and usually true) to admit that we don’t know why our friend’s misfortunes have occurred, but that we feel their suffering deeply.

This is what Job himself told his friends: “For the despairing man there should be kindness from his friend” (6:14 NASB). Kindness, rather than anything that could seem judgmental or condescending (16:4-5), is always key. If we can do this, and show support by simply being with those who suffer, and helping them in any way we can, we are much better able to serve them, and to effectively reflect God’s compassion.

We can also learn much from Elihu’s words. For example, Elihu explained to Job that in our suffering God is not really silent – as Job complained – but may speak to us in ways we do not notice or understand: “For God speaks time and again, but a person may not notice it” (33:14 CSB). God not only speaks to us through his written word, but, as C.S. Lewis so wisely observed, “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain” (*The Problem of Pain*).

Lewis understood pain and suffering as well as anyone. He lost his mother at an early age, was emotionally abandoned by his father, suffered from a severe respiratory illness in his teens, was wounded in World War I, and finally had to see his beloved wife die of cancer before finally dying of cancer himself. But Lewis, like Job, never lost his faith – and found that, as Elihu stated, God can speak to us through our pain, if we let him.

Elihu also confirmed that God uses our suffering to help us hear him: “He delivers the afflicted by their affliction and opens their ear by adversity” (36:15 ESV), or, as the NIV translates this verse, “But those who suffer he delivers in their suffering; he speaks to them in

their affliction.” God not only eventually delivers us from our affliction, but also, in some cases, delivers us *by* our affliction in helping us to hear him through it. Eventually, Job’s suffering helped him to grow beyond the righteousness he already had, and to be even more blessed than he had been before his trials began.

These are just some of the lessons we find in the Book of Job, but we can find many other insights, and great encouragement in the story. Above all, Job can be an inspiration to every believer who is dealing with pain and suffering. And Job’s story can also help those of us who may not be suffering now, but who have the opportunity to help those who are.

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