



What Every Christian Should Know about Job

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The book of Job is a very important book in the Bible. It is one of the longest books and it deals with significant theological concepts: the meaning of suffering, God's control (or lack thereof) over all the events that happen in the world (both good and bad), whether cause and effect is an adequate principle for explaining life's misfortunes, and the power of human relationships to comfort or hurt. For a number of reasons, Job can be a very difficult book to read—for example, its difficult Hebrew, which makes translations sometimes uncertain; its repetition of arguments; its confusion about who is speaking in a specific passage; or the final point of its conclusion.

Though Christians will seldom sit down to read the whole book, there are some things about the book that every Christian should know because of its theological and pastoral importance.

JOB PROVIDES THE DEEPEST AND MOST LENGTHY LOOK AT SUFFERING ANYWHERE IN THE BIBLE

There are many places in the Bible where someone interprets suffering. A certain event is analyzed, and some conclusion is made about the cause of the suffer-

The book of Job takes a deeper look into the problem of suffering than any other book of the Bible. As such, it raises difficult questions about the nature and power of God. It reiterates cause-and-effect thinking (people reap what they sow), while calling it into serious question. For all of these reasons, Christians need to read the book—and to think about how to read it.

ing. Maybe it was the result of human sin, a rebellion against God's commands. Maybe it will lead to some greater good that is not evident at the moment but some day will be revealed. Maybe it is the work of some evil power that is working against both God and humanity. These and other possibilities are raised here and there throughout the Bible—in the Pentateuch, the history in Samuel and Kings, the writings of the prophets, the Psalms, and the words of Jesus and Paul. But there is no place other than Job where the arguments presented elsewhere in the Bible are gathered together and discussed in considerable depth and at great length.

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All the efforts to make sense of the presence of human suffering raise questions about God's participation in the suffering. Does God control everything that happens, even tragedy, pain, and suffering? Both Job and his counselor seem to believe that. If so, that raises difficult questions about the nature and power of God when terrible things happen: Is God loving and kind or punishing and cruel? Is God powerful enough to defeat evil and suffering or not? Is God on my side or not? Most of the biblical efforts to explain suffering try not to blame God without abandoning belief in God's power to control events. So, God has the power, but human sin, the presence of evil forces, and the possibility that pain can achieve a greater purpose will modify how God's power is understood.

THE FORMAT OF THE BOOK

When reading the book of Job, it is important to have some knowledge of how the book is structured. Especially, one needs to know who is speaking. Is it Job, one of his friends, God, or Satan? What may sound like a helpful word from one of the counselors, even one that may be found elsewhere in the Bible, may not be a comforting word that Job is willing to accept.

Job begins and ends with prose sections (the prologue and the epilogue), written in good Hebrew, that tell the basic story about Job, how good a person he was, how he became the subject of heavenly debates between God and Satan, and subsequently became the victim of two series of calamities. In the epilogue, Job is given back all that he lost and is apparently at ease again in his relationship with God.

The main part of the book of Job (chaps. 3–31) is composed of three cycles of dialogues between Job and his three friends who come to console him at the end of chapter 2. Job begins the conversation with a painful lament in chapter 3. Then, in turn, the three friends speak, with Job responding to each of them. Job's responses strongly indicate that he does not like what they are saying about him—mainly,

that he is responsible for his suffering because of his sin. This same format (counselor, Job, counselor, etc.) continues for three cycles (chaps. 4–14; 15–21; 22–27). When reading the book, one needs to be aware that no matter how reasonable the counselors could be at times, their efforts are not acceptable to Job. There is some confusion at the end of the third cycle about who is actually speaking. The book continues with the insertion of a poem about the limits of human wisdom (chap. 28) and Job’s final monologue (chaps. 29–31).

Chapters 32–37 interrupt the flow of the book. They comprise a monologue by Elihu, a fourth counselor not earlier introduced. Most scholars believe that this is a later writing inserted into the book to try to clarify and criticize both Job and his friends for their inability to come to a satisfactory explanation for Job’s situation.

Finally, God speaks with two speeches in chapters 38–42. There is much to ponder here. God is the Creator and is much involved with the world of nature, the heavens, the weather, even the animals. A major point, made by God, is that some things are known only to God, and humans will always be limited in their understanding. The choice is not to hope for an eventual outbreak of wisdom to explain all the wonders of the universe but to rely on one’s relationship with God, who can be trusted with what humans can never know.

JOB IS A MODEL OF THE BEST PERSON ONE CAN BE, YET HE HAS MORE TROUBLE THAN ANYBODY

As they enter the meat of the dialogues, readers must keep in mind that, according to the book, Job is the best model of a faithful, pious human being that one could possibly find. He is so good that God feels compelled to brag about him in a conversation with Satan. This is obviously an exaggeration meant to make a point. If even someone as good as Job can have such a terrible series of tragedies in his life—loss of property, death of children and servants, loss of respect, and a terrible illness—then how can anyone continue to argue that there is a direct cause-and-effect link between bad behavior and suffering? In Job, the author has given extreme examples—the best person and the most trouble—to demonstrate that one cannot automatically assume guilt in the history of someone who suffers.

Some have argued that the assumption of Job’s innocence is too much to swallow. Aren’t all human beings sinners? Eliphaz, the first counselor to speak, already makes that point in chapter 4. It is also true that very few people will have as terrible a series of events as did Job. The author clearly wants the reader to keep these extremes in mind and not give up on the assumptions of the story. Many commentators on the book of Job have found it too easy to join the counselors in finding some fault in Job that, after all, might have brought about his suffering. This is an “easy way out,” which does not do justice to the complexity and mystery of the book.

DIFFICULT SCENES BETWEEN GOD AND SATAN IN CHAPTERS 1–2

Many who start reading the book are immediately puzzled, maybe offended, by the conversations between God and Satan in chapters 1 and 2. God has opened the door for the discussion by bragging about Job's goodness and faithfulness. Satan takes issue with God's assumption. Job may seem to be pious, obedient, and loyal to God, but Satan says that Job will turn away from God if events start to turn against him. Why shouldn't he be a faithful servant? God has provided him with all good things. What will happen if his good fortune disappears? God yields to Satan's suggestion to put Job to the test. Trouble comes in two stages: loss of property, servants, and children in chapter 1, and loss of health in chapter 2.

This raises many questions about God. Why does a good God allow Satan to hurt his servant about whom he has just been boasting? Does God need to prove something about Job for himself now that Satan has raised the question? Why do people commit to serving God—is it only to get some reward? Satan may have evil intentions, but does he need permission from God in order to commit his foul deeds? None of these questions is easily answered.

One thing to remember is that this is the author speculating about what is happening in heaven. The writer of these words has not witnessed any of this conversation. It comes from his imagination. It may tell more about the author and his experience than it does about God. Further, Satan has put God in a tough spot. If God refuses to go ahead and test Satan's claim that Job's loyalty is merely self-serving, then God could be accused of denying the truth and not dealing with human reality. If God does allow misfortune to befall Job, as in this story, then God can be accused of disloyalty and cruelty to God's own devoted followers. God's dilemma, whether or not to follow Satan's suggestion to test Job, raises hard questions about God for readers of the book.

THE BOOK RAISES QUESTIONS ABOUT REWARD AND PUNISHMENT IN *THIS LIFE*

Human beings seem to have a great desire for the world to be fair. Good people should be rewarded for their good deeds and evildoers should be punished or, at least, denied the success of their wicked ways. This mindset can be found in most cultures and religions, not just in biblical traditions. Much of the Old Testament interprets historical events in the lives of people as rewards or punishments for their behavior, their obedience or disloyalty toward God. Adam and Eve sin, so they are thrown out of the garden. David sins with Bathsheba, and rebellion and suffering inhabit his house. The book of Proverbs makes clear that those whose activity pleases God will be granted a successful life, whereas those who follow foolish ways will experience the opposite. The nation that turns to idols and oppresses its own vulnerable citizens will be destroyed by an outside enemy and sent into exile. Do the right thing and all will go well for you. Follow the ways of the wicked and you will be asking for trouble. It all seems so clear-cut.

Toward the end of the Old Testament, this cause-and-effect thinking comes

under serious questioning—as in the lament psalms, Ecclesiastes, Job, and elsewhere. As mentioned earlier, Job’s moral character and the extent of his suffering are exaggerated to make the question impossible to avoid. It is, in fact, true that sometimes good people suffer and wicked people prosper. Christians believe in a life after death that helps to make sense out of this problem. The good may have trouble in this life, but they will achieve their reward in the next one. Likewise, the evil ones may “get away with it” now, but God will see that they are punished in the next life. So, justice is achieved after all—it just takes more time and it happens in another world, now unseen. Job could take little consolation in a belief that it would all work out in the next life. Mostly, he thinks that this world is all that there is, and therefore it is a tragedy when a good person—like Job himself—suffers, while people much worse than he are living a happy and prosperous life.

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JOB’S REACTION TO HIS SUFFERING

Job was both accepting and complaining about his situation—accepting at the beginning and ending of the book, complaining in between. Job is often described as the “patient” one who endures all his troubles with a stoic posture that takes whatever God gives him without a word of protest. This view is derived primarily from the prologue in chapters 1 and 2: “The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD” (1:21); similarly, “Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?” (2:10). To retain a “patient” Job, however, readers must stop after chapter 2 and ignore the many pages of complaint that follow—complaint against both Job’s inadequate counselors and God. People of faith have tended to diminish the value of the lament tradition throughout the Bible, preferring praise and a happy face to words of woe and abandonment. This tendency to downplay lament has made it easy to focus on the patient Job rather than the defiant one.

In chapter 42, Job does seem to return to a kind of humility and stoicism, speaking in words similar to those in chapters 1 and 2. But it took him a long time to get there, as well as a reality check from God in the two speeches of chapters 38–41. The matter of timing is important. Job was putting up a good front in the beginning of the book, trying to convince himself that he could accept the terrible turn of events in his life. But, it was too soon; he wasn’t ready for this yet. When his friends arrived, he could no longer hold back his anguish. He opened the dialogues with a powerful and painful lament in chapter 3. Then, for three cycles of speeches, Job’s complaining was almost nonstop. Finally, after God spoke to him directly, Job returned to where he wanted to be in the first place. Sometimes, lament may be

stifled for a while, but it needs to be spoken before one can return to faith in a God who can be trusted, even if many of our questions and doubts remain.

THE TWO BEST-KNOWN TEXTS: JOB 1:21 AND 19:25

When I graduated from seminary, an association of funeral directors gave each of us graduates a manual with various helps for conducting funerals, including a list of possible biblical texts. Both these texts from Job were included: “The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD” (1:21); “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at last he will stand upon the earth” (19:25). In recent years I have seldom heard the reading from chapter 1, but I have often heard the “Redeemer” passage in chapter 19, even for funerals in my own family.

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Many folks feel compelled to argue with the passive acceptance and stoicism of 1:21. There are too many cases they know where the words “the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away” don’t seem to fit. What about the tragic death of a child in an accident or as a victim of a terrible disease? What about the many people killed in an earthquake or tsunami? The father of a murdered daughter would probably find little comfort in these words. It is not pleasant to think of a “loving” God permitting or causing such awful events. On the other hand, in a different context, perhaps one could find some peace in hearing these words; consider, for example, an old woman, weary with life, deprived of all her old friends, suffering with an incurable illness, who wants to die and who wishes God would take her.

There is much speculation about who Job had in mind as his Redeemer in chapter 19. Clearly, he wants this person to declare him innocent, to take away the shame of being accused as the cause of his own trouble. He wants to know about his redemption, either while still alive or somehow brought back from the dead to see it. It is easy for Christians to make a connection between the role of the Redeemer in Job and the work of Christ to save us from the consequences of our sin and pronounce us innocent. Consequently, this is a common text for Christian funerals, no matter what Job himself actually meant when he said it.

JOB COMES CLOSE TO A BELIEF IN LIFE AFTER DEATH

As stated above, there is some uncertainty about what Job meant in 19:25–27 concerning the possibility of life after death and his belief that “my Redeemer lives.” At least there is a leaning in the direction of hope for reconciliation with

God, even after death. He longs to see God face to face and to be assured that God looks on him favorably. This may be only a fleeting glimmer of hope over against the many places where Job speaks as if death is a dead end with nothing to follow.

Job raises an interesting analogy between human life and the stump of a tree in 14:7–17. If water is applied to a dead stump it will “put forth branches like a young plant.” The tree will come back to life. By contrast, mortals die. They lie down and do not rise again. They will not awake or be roused from their sleep. In verse 14, he asks the primary question—“If mortals die, will they live again?” Then he goes on to imagine how it would be if God would call him, seal up his transgressions in a bag, and cover his iniquity (vv. 15–17). The analogy that connects the revival of the natural world with the possibility of the rebirth of humans is common in Scripture and Christian thinking (think, for example, of Easter with the coming of spring and all the beautiful flowers). After Job indulges himself in this wonderful image of life with God after death, he quickly slips back into pessimism about this possibility. He says to God, “The waters wear away the stones; the torrents wash away the soil of the earth; so you destroy the hope of mortals” (v. 19). The realities of life continue to threaten his flimsy hope.

IT IS DIFFICULT TO BE A GOOD COUNSELOR

Job’s counselors are often maligned for their clumsy efforts to comfort Job. They are often presented as examples of how *not* to approach friends or family in times of suffering. They were more concerned with protecting their own theology—that God would not be doing this to Job if he did not deserve it—than with listening and empathizing with him. Job had become a difficult theological question to be solved rather than a human being crying out in despair at what was happening to him and wondering why God had chosen to turn against him. Rather than feeling better after his conversations with them, Job becomes steadily angrier about his painful situation, about the words and attitude of his friends, and about his sense of abandonment by God.

The reader should remember that Job’s friends came with good intentions: “They met together to go and console and comfort him” (2:11). They were so shocked by his appearance that they wept and sat silently with him for seven days (2:12–13). It is clear that they did not come to him to hurt him or to make him feel worse. They wished they had the right words to say to make him feel better, to give him some intellectual formula that would help him make sense of his misery. But first, all they could do was sit silently with him. Eventually, they did begin to speak, but that only made things worse. All their efforts to say the “right thing” were heard by Job as criticism, as blame for his own trouble. The counselors reasoned that, although Job seemed to be a good and pious man, no one is perfect. There must be some sin somewhere that has caused God to bring disaster into his life.

Several thoughts about our own efforts to alleviate someone’s suffering come to mind. Even people with the best intentions can sometimes say the most hurtful

things—things like: “It is a blessing that you still have other children”; “God needed another angel for his choir”; “There’s a purpose for everything that happens”; “He should have gone to the doctor earlier and taken better care of himself.” People want to be helpful and they scramble to find something to say, maybe a word that they have heard in a sermon or a self-help book or even in the Bible. But what is appropriate in one context may not be in another. A word that seems satisfying to the counselor may not be to the sufferer. Sometimes, the best thing to do is to be silent, to be with someone, to listen to them, to let them know how much they are loved, and not to try too hard to make sense of everything. Many commentators on Job have said that the best counseling that the friends did was to be silent for seven days. Once they offered their reasons for Job’s suffering, they were getting into dangerous waters.

Job was a tough case. He did not passively accept their efforts and thank them for coming. He often argued with them and criticized their treatment of him. Surely, he made them uncomfortable and defensive. First in chapter 6 and then again in chapter 13, Job accuses them of telling lies about him in order to protect their view of God, and he dismisses them as no longer fit to be counselors.

It is hard to be a counselor. We try to say too much and pretend to know more than we do. Better to try to support the sufferers’ relationships with God and other people than to pile on “answers” that may or may not be helpful. When God speaks at the end of the book, there is still no definitive answer to why Job has suffered. If there is an answer, it is relational rather than logical or doctrinal. But the restored relationship is no small thing. In 38:1–42:5, God shows up, God speaks, and Job responds. “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you,” says Job to God (42:5)—and this seems to change everything, certainly for Job, and perhaps for the reader as well. ⊕

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