



Job - Introduction

The Sufferer

By Isaac Humphrey

Summary

The book of Job deals with the deepest questions about God's nature and justice. We have Job, the questioning sufferer, surrounded by well-meaning friends whose theology ignores the real world, and God's true nature. Job wants to know why, and the only being who can answer that question is God himself.

Job highlights humanity's need for a go-between for God and us - a need we have had since Eden - one that is ultimately answered through Jesus.

A Righteous Man from Uz

"Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a pure and upright man, one who fears God and turns away from evil." (Job 1:8 NET). If one could take the principles of the New Testament, specifically Jesus' teachings on purity of thoughts (Matthew 5:21-30) and James' 'pure and undefiled' religion, and turn those into an Old Testament Patriarch, that man would be Job. ¹

In Job's character, we see a foreshadowing of the New Testament: the Sermon on the Mount and the book of James - a character and lifestyle that resonate through the ages and into the Christian era.

Job was a man who was deeply concerned about his relationship with God; a man deeply concerned about justice and piety, conscientious, and dedicated to righteousness. He was faithful, reverent: a seeker of God who combines his faith with good deeds: caring for the fatherless and widows (James 1:27), seeking justice for the oppressed, and dealing uprightly with all (Job 31).

As a result, God blessed Job abundantly, set up a 'hedge of protection' around him. It must have been an earth-shattering, mind-bending surprise when one day everything goes wrong for Job. Children killed in a storm, fire from heaven on the sheep, raiders taking the other livestock, and finally, Job's own body attacked by a dreadful disease. Job sits down on an ash heap and tries to understand why. He does not know about Satan and thinks these disasters are directly from the hand of God. Job does not lash out in hatred or anger towards God; instead, he is simply shocked and perplexed, afraid and troubled. He knows God is good and just and righteous; he knows he has done nothing wrong, but yet it appears that God is angry with him. Job does the only thing he can do, and that is turn to God, whom he knows is good and just, and ask 'why?'

The Question

As Job sits there contemplating his own situation, a question that he has probably had deep in his heart for a long time comes to the surface.

In all his dealings with the poor and in all his assistance to the oppressed, Job came into frequent contact with the wicked. He noticed that the wicked often grew old and fat and died peacefully, passing on their ill-gotten gain to their children. I believe that this led Job to the fundamental theological question we all ask at some point or another - is God good? Is He just? Why is there evil? Why did God set up this world the way He did?

I once heard it said that "this was the one bit of dross in Job's heart of gold, and it took a great trial for that deep-down question to come to the surface so God could address it."

As Job struggles to find an answer to his dilemma, we (the readers of this book) end up sitting right down beside him and embarking on the same quest. We know the backstory to Job's sufferings, but that backstory makes us as perplexed as Job is!

God and Satan are talking, and God points out Job. Satan declares that Job's righteousness is only a result of his prosperity and protection; take that away, Satan says, and Job will curse God like everyone else. God allows Satan to take Job's material blessings and physical health away.

It should be pointed out that God is not the one who afflicts Job, that is Satan. At the same time, God was the one who allowed Satan to test Job. Thus Satan works for his own evil ends (to cause suffering), and God works for His own righteous ends (to refine Job and provide future generations with His words).

Even with more knowledge, we have to ask the same question as Job - why did God set up things the way he did, and why does he allow Satan to work evil in this world?

The Answers

The first chapters of Job lay out the problem, and the rest of the book explores the answers. Job himself does not have an answer, and he lays out his questions and troubles the way he sees them. Job has three friends who attempt to answer his dilemma and provide a solution to his troubles with their simple views of theology and their not-so-factual views of the world. In the end, a younger theologian offers his opinions which are not very different from those of the first trio. Finally, at the end of the book, God Himself appears to Job and gives an answer that is as deep as the question.

First Round (Chapters 3-11)

Job begins the conversation expressing his grief and frustration, wondering why. Why had he been born? Why was he not dead?

This rather intense and alarming speech provoked the first friend, Eliphaz, to speak. Eliphaz attempts to set Job straight by laying out a simple theology. Bad things only happen to bad people; good people are safe from harm - "*who ever perished, being innocent?*" (Job 4:7 KJV) The insinuation is that Job's sufferings are a result of his sins. If Job would only turn back to God, says Eliphaz, he would be healed and forgiven.

This advice is most unhelpful to Job, who has not done anything wrong and has been living as close to God as he knows how. Job mainly ignores his friend's insults and

wishes that he could die and his sufferings would be at an end.

Job's second friend, Bildad, speaks next. He basically asks, 'do you think God has made a mistake? If you are suffering, it is because you are doing something wrong. If you were really innocent, God would not be punishing you.' This is the basic tenant of the three friends' theology. Bildad tells Job he needs to repent, and then all would be restored. He then goes on into his favorite subject to speak and poeticize on - the downfall of the wicked.

Job contradicts his friend's theories on the 'sudden destruction of the wicked.' He states that bad things happen to good and bad people alike, and in fact, the world is run by the wicked, and God allows it to happen!

Job again ignores his friends and turns to a deep question. He knows he is righteous, but how can human righteousness satisfy God. Job wants to speak with God to plead his case, but he realizes the futility of that endeavor. The fact that Job feels the need to reach out to God even though he thinks it is God who is afflicting him shows that Job has an underlying belief in the goodness of God, a deep faith that trusts God even when he does not understand.

Job's third friend, Zophar, is incensed by Job's assertions of his own righteousness and the implications that God is unjust. *"But oh that God would speak, and open his lips against thee; and that he would shew thee the secrets of wisdom, that they are double to that which is! Know therefore that God exacteth of thee less than thine iniquity deserveth."* (Job 11:5-6). This is the conclusion of Zophar - that Job is a sinner and is foolish to think that God can be found.

In the first round, Job has asked how God's justice works and the need to find God. The three friends have diagnosed Job as a stubborn sinner who foolishly insists on arguing with God and refuses to repent of his supposed iniquities. Job cannot do anything with his friend's advice and instead wants to talk to God.

Second Round (Chapters 12-20)

"No doubt but ye are the people, and wisdom shall die with you." (Job 12:2). This is Job's sarcastic reply to his friends. Job has decided that they are denying reality with their assertions that *"the triumphing of the wicked is short"* (Job 20:5) and claims that instead, *"the tabernacles of the robbers prosper!"* (Job 12:6) Job then goes back to wrestling with his understanding of God, longing to speak with God and wondering why He is so angry.

Eliphaz hotly contests Job's assertions about his own righteousness, God's justice, and the prosperity of the wicked. God is high and mighty: He *"puts no trust in his saints... not even the heavens are clean in his sight."* (Job 15:15). Job has a far too high opinion of his opinions: *"Art thou the first man that was born? or wast thou made before the hills?"* (Job 15:7) Eliphaz sarcastically asks. As far as the wicked man goes, Eliphaz knows his fate: *"He shall not be rich, neither shall his substance continue, neither shall he prolong the perfection thereof upon the earth."* (Job 15:29)

Job's friends are saying the same things they have been, and Job mostly ignores them, though he does remark on how their speeches hurt rather than help him. Job wants to

speaking with God but does not know how. He longs for a mediator, a go-between, to talk to God on his behalf.

The trio of friends are repeating themselves rather monotonously. Job is much too arrogant, Bildad says, and then goes off on his favorite topic - the downfall of the wicked. *"The light shall be dark in his tabernacle, and his candle shall be put out with him. The steps of his strength shall be straitened, and his own counsel shall cast him down. For he is cast into a net by his own feet, and he walketh upon a snare... Terrors shall make him afraid on every side and shall drive him to his feet. His strength shall be hungerbitten, and destruction shall be ready at his side."* (Job 18:6-8, 11-12).

Job recognizes that all this talk about the destruction of the wicked is an insinuation that Job's misfortunes result from his wickedness. Job knows his innocence and is hurt by his friend's speeches. Job pleads with them to have mercy on him and not add to his troubles.

Then, amid his trouble and grief, Job utters these words of faith and prophecy.

"For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: and though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God: whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another; though my reins be consumed within me." (Job 19:25-27)

Zophar simply repeats what his friends have said before: *"the triumphing of the wicked is short."* And spends a great deal of time poeticizing on the demise of that group.

Third Round (Chapters 21-31)

Job now directly engages with his friends. Is the 'triumphing of the wicked' short? No! *"Wherefore do the wicked live, become old, yea, are mighty in power?"* Job asks, *"Their houses are safe from fear, neither is the rod of God upon them."* (Job 21:7, 9).

Job further tells his friends that he sees through their "speeches against the wicked" and recognizes that they are an attack on him. Job does clarify that he believes the wicked are sometimes punished visibly in this life by God, but that is not always the case.

Eliphaz now gives his third and final speech. He no longer insinuates but is blunt and forthright; he has been brought to a boiling point of indignation by Job's assertions. Eliphaz states that God is so high and mighty that He is indifferent to Job's righteousness or pleas for an explanation. The very idea that God would 'enter into judgment' with Job is ridiculous! Besides, Job is not righteous in the first place. Bad things happen to bad people, and Job is one of the worst.

"Is not thy wickedness great? and thine iniquities infinite?" Eliphaz thunders. *"For thou hast taken a pledge from thy brother for nought, and stripped the naked of their clothing. Thou hast not given water to the weary to drink, and thou hast withholden bread from the hungry... Thou hast sent widows away empty, and the arms of the fatherless have been broken."* (Job 22:6-7, 9). Even this, explains Eliphaz, can be forgiven if only Job would repent!

Job ignores Eliphaz for the moment and goes back to his quest to find God: *"Oh that I knew where I might find him!... I would order my cause before him, and fill my mouth with*

arguments.” What would happen when Job found God? *“Will he plead against me with his great power? No; but he would put strength in me.”* (Job 23:3-6). Job knows that God is still good, even though he does not understand.

Bildad paints a picture of God as high and mighty *“...the stars are not pure in his sight. How much less man, that is a worm? and the son of man, which is a worm?”* (Job 25:5-6). Thus Job can never be innocent. This is the last speech of the three friends.

Job now makes his last speech, beginning with a sarcastic dismissal of his friends. Job next touches on God’s greatness and also his desire to find wisdom - to know and understand. He then spends the last part of his speech in a reminiscence on his past life and a thorough defense of his character, which is the exact opposite of what his friends have asserted. Far from being a wicked oppressor, he was the man who had fought against them!

His friends have nothing new to say in the face of Job’s self-confidence and so give up the conversation.

Elihu Speaks (Chapters 32-37)

While Job and his three friends have been speaking, there is a younger man in the audience named Elihu. Elihu is upset by Job’s attitude (or rather his perception of it) and is upset at Job’s three friends for not answering convincingly. ²

When the others have said their piece and gave up, Elihu sets in on a long monologue: *“Wherefore, Job, I pray thee, hear my speeches, and hearken to all my words. Behold, now I have opened my mouth, my tongue hath spoken in my mouth.”* (Job 33:2).

Elihu took Job’s remarks to be an attack on God’s justice. He affirms that God is just and cannot pervert justice. Elihu takes a very similar stance to Job’s friends on the fate of the wicked - and especially the rebellious. *“He preserveth not the life of the wicked...”* *“But if they obey not, they shall perish by the sword...They die in youth.”* (Job 36:6,12,14)

Elihu paints a picture of God as detached, high, far-off. *“If thou sinnest, what doest thou against him? or if thy transgressions be multiplied, what doest thou unto him? If thou be righteous, what givest thou him? or what receiveth he of thine hand?”* (Job 35:6-7)

Righteousness and unrighteousness hurt men but do not affect God. Elihu’s point is that Job is too insignificant to question God or ask to speak with him.

Then Elihu starts in on the attack on Job, who he suggests is receiving the judgment of the wicked. God is great, and Job ought to be put in his place. He then goes into a speech about the marvels of creation which show the power of God.

God Speaks (Chapters 38-41)

Job has wanted to speak with God, and God comes down to speak with Job - showing that His character was different from the cold portrait painted by Job’s friends.

Job’s basic questions are, “is God in control? If so, why do the righteous suffer, and the wicked prosper? Why did God set up the universe the way he did?”

God begins at the beginning with the fundamental counter-question - *“Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?”* (Job 38:4 WEB). God then proceeds to list out the wonders of creation, from light to hail, from snow to clouds, from horses to eagles,

from leviathan to behemoth: asking Job if he understands them. ³

After this, God challenges Job: *"Shall he who argues contend with the Almighty? He who argues with God, let him answer it."* (Job 40:2 WEB). Can we condemn God to establish our own righteousness?

"Hast thou an arm like God? or canst thou thunder with a voice like him?" The basic point is - can we run the universe? Can we *"Look on every one that is proud, and bring him low"*? (Job 40:9,12)

This is the answer Job needed - it was intellectual and emotional. God showed Job that He was in control and that His wisdom is above that of humanity. Job was able to find satisfaction in the wonder and greatness of God - the revelation re-formed a proper image of God in Job's mind.

Job repented 'in dust and ashes' of his questionings of God's justice.

After God talks with Job, he addresses Job's three friends and lets them know that their theology was wrong and they must ask Job to intercede on their behalf. This must have been a surprise to the self-confident trio of theologians. But they put their pride behind them and came to Job, who prayed for them.

After this work of mediation, Job was healed, restored, and comforted. His fundamental questions were answered, and he had "come forth as gold" from his trial.

Conclusion

We have journeyed through the whole book of Job; God and Satan have mystified us at the beginning of the book; we have listened sympathetically to Job's struggles; we have heard the trio of self-confident and narrow-minded theologians discourse on what they know not about; we have heard from a younger theologian who said much the same; lastly, we have heard the voice of God as He brings us to a fuller understanding of his greatness.

The application of Job is timeless. It touches on the deep nature of God and the questions humanity has with his dealings with the universe.

Job makes us question our simplistic notions of how the universe is run. Bad things happen to good people and don't always occur to the wicked. In the New Testament, we learn that the situation is the opposite: *"...all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution"* (2 Timothy 3:12).

The book of Job deals with the need for a redeemer - someone to intermedate between sinful humanity and a righteous God. Job also deals with the age-old questions about God's nature and his doings. We wonder why; we wonder if God is actually in control of the universe. God's answer? He is God - He is great - *"Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? ... Hast thou an arm like God? or canst thou thunder with a voice like him?"* (Job 38:4 WEB; 40:9 KJV).

The book of Job is deep but will reward us when we carefully study it with a humble heart.

Footnotes

1. Job is still very relevant in today's modern society and throughout all ages. Compare Job 31:1 with Matthew 5:28, Job 31:18 with James 1:27 (see also Coffman, Cambridge, and Pulpit on Job 31).

2. Elihu and his speech have been viewed from widely different perspectives throughout the ages, including theories that the whole thing was an interpolation added later. Some picture Elihu sitting by patiently waiting for his turn to share his wisdom, while others picture him huffing and puffing, rolling his eyes, and impatiently pacing until he can pour forth his vain pontifications. The controversy on Elihu dates back quite a ways: Origen (pre-Nicene father) was favorable to Elihu, while Gregory the Great (post-Nicene) was not.

For a defense of Elihu, see Pulpit Commentary on Job 32:1 and the rest of the speech, and for the opposite view, see Coffman on the same passage.

3. Leviathan and Behemoth have been the subject of much controversy and attempts to assign their identities to various modern animals. There were, however, ancient animals that match the description more closely than a hippopotamus or crocodile.

References

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