THE BOOK OF

Introduction

The Complaint of Job, By William Blake, 1825

Suffering is at the heart of the Book of Job. Since all men and women know the experience of suffering, the book has universal appeal. Its message cuts across time and culture. More specifically, the main character of the book suffers though he apparently is not the cause of his suffering. His physical ailments, accordingly, are compounded by mental anguish: "Why me? What have I done to deserve this fate?"

The book also raises one of the most perplexing questions facing men and women: are God's ways just? This is the question of theodicy. Theodicy focuses on the attempt to understand divine justice, or the apparent lack of it. The simplest form of theodicy attempts to reconcile the existence of evil with an all loving and all powerful God. Many solve the tension by claiming that God is not all loving or that He is not all powerful. An increasing number of people resolve the tension by claiming there is no God and that life is nothing more than chance.

The main challenge with reading and studying Job is that the question of theodicy and many other questions are largely left unanswered. Therefore, the payoff of Job is not in finding answers to questions, but in the journey of steadfast faith which leads us deeper into Jesus who has, "Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows" (Isaiah 53:4).

Main questions in Job

1) Are God's ways just?
2) Does Job fear God for nothing?
3) Is there really such a thing as a true believer?
4) Can anyone remain faithful to God even when all of His rich blessings are taken away?
5) Is God really worthy of worship for His own sake and not just for the good things He gives?
6) Who is wise? (Especially in the dialogue between Job and his friends)
7) The name Job means enemy (Job 13:24; 33:10). Is Job God's enemy?
8) How does one live wisely in a world of pain and hardship? (Job 28)

Job: a book of many questions with few IF ANY answers

The book of Job is perplexing because it doesn't give us the answers we want. We want to know why good people suffer, and the book leaves that question entirely unanswered. The book is baffling because much of its central section is in the words of Job's friends, whom God says did not speak what was right. So how are we supposed to know what to learn from what they say? (Perhaps as an example of what NOT to say) And what about Job himself? In the seemingly endless dialogues, Job's way of talking to God seems more petulant than patient. He argues with God and complains about his situation. The book seems to be one long lament. Aren't Christians supposed to be joyful all the time?

Job is also a very long book, and that, too, is significant. The book consists of forty-two chapters because there are no quick-fix or easy answers to the questions it raises. **There is no instant release from grief. The book's length invites the reader into the process of reflection. It takes us on a journey and the journey takes time. The payoff is in the journey and going through the process.** Job invites us to join in an exploration of the process of loss and grief. In that process our faith may be reworked and our lives may be transformed, as Job's were.

Beware: a study of Job may frustrate you. In his search for answers, Job concludes, "Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding." (Job 28:28) Instead of answers, Job offers encouragement. And the encouragement we need from Job is the encouragement to persevere in faith to the end.

You Reap What You Sow (Retributive Justice)

You reap what you sow! Isn't that right? Even the Bible says so – "Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap" (Galatians 6:7). It is true that God does act according to retributive justice. But at the end of the book of Job, God will declare that Job's friends have not spoken of him what is right as his servant Job has (Job 42:7–8). Why? What was wrong with what they had to say?

- **A simplistic view of God's retributive justice.**

First, these friends of Job are rebuked by God because, though they speak the truth, it is not the whole truth. While it is true that God never acts unjustly, it is also true that God does not always exercise his retributive justice in an immediate and recognizable way. Additionally, God may have other reasons for his actions that are not explained by his justice. God cannot be put in some neat little moralistic box, such that his actions are entirely predictable based on our behavior. We like to think of the world is that way. We assume there is some intelligible moral order that gives a clear-cut reason for everything that happens.

God can use suffering to teach us. And God can also use suffering simply to magnify his own glory. When Jesus' disciples saw a man born blind from birth, they assumed this principle of retributive justice. So, they asked Jesus, "Who sinned, this man or his parents?" "Neither," Jesus said, "but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him" (John 9:2-3).

Getting what you deserve is not the whole truth. And when you think about it, a simplistic application of retributive justice would mean there could never be grace. That's why strict moralists don't like the notion of grace. It just doesn't fit, for grace can never be deserved. Grace seems to interrupt the moral order of the cosmos.

- **The fear of the disruption of the moral order.**

Bildad simply can't believe that God would treat a godly man the way Job has been treated. That would throw the whole moral fabric of the universe into disarray; the very foundations, the rocks on which he has built his life, would be demolished. He says to Job, "You who tear yourself to pieces in your anger, is the earth to be abandoned for your sake? Or must the rocks be moved from their place? (Job 18:4).

To admit that Job was suffering righteously would be too discomforting, too distressing, and Job himself points this out to them—Now you … have proved to be of no help; you see something dreadful and are afraid. (Job 6:21)

Job's situation makes them afraid that their whole view of God and the world is going to be crushed. That's frightening. Within a simplistic view of God's retributive justice, we can control what happens to us. Our prosperity is within our power. But Job's case shatters the myth that our own righteousness can protect us from unjust suffering. **By blaming Job, the friends are trying to protect themselves.**

We do this all the time. When we see someone suffering, our first response is often to distance ourselves from them. When we read about a murder in the paper, we may be tempted to think, "Oh, that was gang-related. That doesn't affect me." Or when we hear about someone getting cancer, we may look for a cause in their life that isn't found in ours.

We want to separate ourselves from sufferers. We want reasons for suffering. We want to establish why what happened to them won't happen to us, or at least we want to see how we can keep it from happening to us. **What we fear is inexplicable suffering!**

Yes, Job's friends speak the truth, but it's not the whole truth. God doesn't always just give people what they deserve. There is such a thing as innocent suffering.

- **The friends' misapplied truth.**

Job's friends speak the truth, but in this case, it is misapplied truth. It is misapplied, first, to Job's objective moral state. We know that his suffering was not the result of his sin. He is innocent. And paradoxically, since that is the case, the friends' exhortation to repent so that he can again enjoy God's blessing was nothing but a temptation for Job. If he did repent of sins he knows he did not commit, it would prove Satan to be right—Job would be abandoning his own integrity and would just be using God for his own self-interest. To his credit, Job refuses to go there.

Second, the friends' truth is also misapplied to Job's subjective state of mind. What they gave Job was not what he needed. Job was in an abyss of despair—and for good reason. Everything that he valued—his property, his position in society, his entire family, his health, even his wife's loyalty—had been taken from him. And his God was nowhere to be found. He speaks out of the anguish of his heart, but the friends respond to him as if they were in a theology classroom. **The friends theologize and rationalize rather than sympathize.** Their insistence that their truth applies to Job's situation only makes his anguish even more agonizing. No wonder Job calls them "miserable comforters" (Job 16:2).

The book of Job does not begin to explain all the reasons for suffering in the world. It rejects the retributive justice theory of the three friends as the only explanation of the origin of suffering. **Job established once and for all that personal sin is not the only reason for suffering in this world.**

Outline and Overview

Job 1-2	Prose prologue that introduces character and plot
Job 3-31	Job's dialogues with his three friends
Job 3	Job's lament
Job 4-27	Three cycles of dialogues
Job 28	The poem on Divine Wisdom
Job 29-31	Job's last speech
Job 32-37	Elihu's monologue
Job 38-42:6	Yahweh speaks from the whirlwind
Job 42:7-17	The prose epilogue that draws the action to a close

THE key verse in Job – Job 1:1

There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job, and **that man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.**

This verse sets the scene for all that follows. Without this premise, the rest of the story loses all its dramatic power. There is no uncertainty in the author's mind—this man Job is a godly man. This superlative assessment of Job's condition is clear. It is never contradicted by the narrator, and it is affirmed by God himself twice in the book's first two chapters and then again in the last (Job 1:8; 2:6; 42:7, 8). Only his friends will deny it. So, hold on to it. You will miss the point of the book if you forget it. Job is a godly man.

The description of Job's piety comes in two pairs. First, he is said to be "blameless and upright"—characterizing him as a man of untarnished character and genuine faith. The word for "blameless" does not mean that Job was without sin—Job himself refers to "the sins of my youth" in Job 13:26, and "my sin" in Job 14:16. "Blameless" here simply points to Job's moral character. It speaks of his genuineness and authenticity. There is nothing hypocritical about him. **Job was a man of personal integrity, not sinless perfection.** The next term, "upright," is similar, but it shifts the focus away from Job's own character to the way he treated other people. He acted fairly in his dealings with others; he showed mercy to those in need.

The second pair of descriptions turn toward his relationship with God. Job's humble piety is described as, "he feared God and shunned evil." The poem about wisdom later in Job will proclaim this as the very definition of wisdom (Job 28:28). This "fear of God" is often depicted in the Bible as the supreme mark of the godly person. It is the beginning of wisdom (Prov 1:7; 9:10), and it creates the proper posture of the human being in reverence and awe before their Creator. Fundamentally, it means respecting God as God and treating him accordingly. And as a result, Job "shunned evil." That is, he maintained a constant repentant heart, habitually turning away from evil in his thoughts, words, and deeds. There is no question—Job is a genuine believer and a model of godliness.

The Prologue – Job chapters 1-2

The prologue opens the narrative by introducing the main characters and the setting. It initiates the plot by raising the problem that needs a resolution: Job's suffering despite his apparent innocence. The prologue also takes the reader behind the scenes into the very council chamber of God. We know what the characters do not; we know that Job's suffering is a test of his faithfulness to God.

Job 3 – The IMpatience of Job

"You have heard of the patience of Job," said one New Testament writer (James 5:11). But have you heard of his **IM**patience? One who reads beyond the first two chapters of the book of Job will soon learn that Job's famed patience lasted barely a week. Shortly after suffering unspeakable tragedies, Job spoke surprising words of acceptance and trust in God in the face of loss. After seven days of suffering in silence, however, Job filled the air with complaints and accusations toward the God who had repaid his righteousness with ravaging. That side of Job is less familiar but far more important for helping us understand the book's message.

The prologue introduces Job's three friends at the end. However, before they speak, Job begins with the monologue in the form of a lament. He here bemoans his fate, even wondering why he was born. The form of chapter 3 is a lament similar in mood and structure to the "lament psalms." (Psalm 6, 13, 86, 142) Lament is a complaint to God, but it is not "grumblings" against God as condemned in Numbers 11. There are over 60 psalms of lament in the OT. A lament follows the pattern: **Turn to God – Complain - Ask Boldly – Trust - Leads to Praise**

Job's Dialogue with His Three Friends

After Job's lament or complaint, we move into the three cycles of dialogue (Job 4-27). The poetic nature of the dialogues is a signal that we are not reading transcripts of the conversation that took place between Job and his three friends. People in ancient times did not speak in poetic form to one another anymore than we do today.

The highly literary nature of the dialogues is revealed by their structure. There are three cycles in each of which one of the friends addresses Job and then Job responds to each one in turn. The order is always Elpihaz, Bildad, and Zophar. Thankfully, the friends' speeches get much shorter in the last cycle, reflecting the fact that the three are, as we might say, running out of steam.

First Cycle	**Second Cycle**	**Third Cycle**
Eliphaz (4-5)	Eliphaz (15)	Eliphaz (22)
Job (6-7)	Job (16-17)	Job (23-24)
Bildad (8)	Bildad (18)	Bildad(25)
Job (9-10)	Job (19)	Job (26:1-27:12)
Zophar (11)	Zophar (20)	Zophar (27:13-23)
Job (12-14)	Job (21)	Job (28-31)

At the heart of the debate between Job and his three friends is the question, Who is wise? Who has the correct insight into Job's suffering? Both Job and the friends set themselves up as sources of wisdom and ridicule the wisdom of the other. (11:12; 12:1-3, 12; 13:12; 15:1-13). As we will see, this question, "Who is wise?" dominates the book.

The three friends represent the age-old wisdom of retribution theology. (See "You Reap What You So on pages 2-4) In their case, however, it has become rigid and mechanical: God blesses the righteous; he curses the wicked. If so, then if Job suffers, he must be a sinner in need of repentance (4:7-11; 11:13-20).

Job reacts strongly against this line of reasoning. He is suffering, but not because of his sin. (Job nowhere argues that he is totally without sin.) He agrees with Bildad that no one can be righteous before God (9:2), but he questions whether he can get justice from God. He directly counters the wisdom of his friends in 9:21-24, and in this context he utters the bold words, "He destroys both the blameless and the wicked" (Job 9:22).

Job 28

This section is a poem on divine wisdom. In chapter 28, Job has a moment of insight as he responds to Zophar's speech (reconstructed from 27:13-23). In one of the most moving poems in the Old Testament, Job anticipates the conclusion of the book by ascribing all wisdom to God. While the beauty and power of the poem are universally recognized, its place in the book is debated. The poem appears intrusive to those who demand a strict, logical order to Job's thought pattern. That is, here he bows before God's superior wisdom but then complains again in the following three chapters. The final resolution requires God to speak from the whirlwind. Nevertheless, even those who deny

the originality of the chapter often ascribe its authorship to the same person who wrote the dialogues, but they suggest that it was written later in his life.

The problem is not with the book of Job but with the insistence on a logical flow of thought. In chapter 28 he has a moment of insight, but under the burden of suffering this soon passes and gives way to depression once again. A very human response, don't you think?

Job's Last Speech (Job 29-31)

In Job's last words before the momentous conclusion, he reflects on how things were in the past when he enjoyed God's blessings (29). He bemoans his present suffering and complains that God has turned a deaf ear toward him (30:20). He appeals to God once again, declaring that he is blameless and does not deserve the suffering that has come upon him.

Elihu's Monologue (Job 32-37)

At this point, Elihu steps in. Whereas the three friends represented the wisdom of the elders of the time, Elihu instead is the brash young man who thinks he has all the answers. He has waited patiently out of respect for age, expecting the three friends to resolve the issue with Job; but they have failed, and he can no longer remain silent (32:6-9). He cannot stand to see Job complacent in his pride (v.2). In essence, he sets himself up as still another wise man (33:33). But in spite of his claim that he has something new to say (32:14), he comes back to the same old theology of retribution: Job suffers because he has sinned (34:11, 25-27, 37).

Two factors contribute to the common critical contention that the Elihu monologue is not original to the story. The first is that, while the three friends are addressed by God in the conclusion, Elihu is absent. One commentator wrote that God may be ignoring Elihu as insignificant, in effect putting the brash young man in his place. The other objection to the theory that the monologue is a later addition is the fact that he says nothing new. But that is precisely the point. Human wisdom has run out; it is time for God to take the stage.

Yahweh's Speech and Job's Response (Job 38-42:6)

Throughout the dialogues, Job has hoped for an interview with God (23:2-7). He finally gets his wish as God appears to him in the form of a storm. The storm-like form of God's appearance is an indication that He is coming in judgment (Pss. 18, 29; Nahum 1). Job had hoped for a divine interview in order to learn why he was suffering. Significantly, God never directly answers that question except to rebuke Job for casting aspersions on His divine reputation (40:8). "Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself?" His first words from the storm set Job's wisdom in its place and

introduce the next few chapters as God asks Job a series of questions that only the Creator could possibly answer:

Job 38: 1-3 "Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind and said: "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known to me."

The questions that follow demonstrate God's full knowledge and control of the natural order that He created and contrast this with Job's ignorance. The implication is that the same is true for the moral order as well. God knows, but Job is ignorant. This conclusion to the questions of the source of wisdom is punctuated by a series of rhetorical questions that run through the divine speeches and ask about the source of wisdom more explicitly.

Job 38:36-37 "Who has put wisdom in the inward parts or given understanding to the mind? Who can number the clouds by wisdom? Job recognizes the power of God's speech and responds humbly and repentantly. He submits himself to the Almighty God of the universe and His will.

Job's response to Yahweh's speech is essentially:

<u>Epilogue (Job 42:7-17)</u>

The epilogue brings the story to a happy close. Job is reconciled with God and his fortune restored to him. God blesses him and allows him to live a long life. Job found favor in God's eyes because, though he grew impatient with God, he did not "curse God and die" nor did he give in to the simple and insensitive arguments of the friends. When confronted by God, Job appropriately responded with repentance and submission. As a

result, he became an intercessor for his friends, who had advocated a false wisdom of mechanical retribution.

The difference between Job and his friends – the fear of the Lord

The main difference between Job and his friends is not that Job suffers and they do not. Nor is it that Job understands suffering in a way they do not. The main difference is that **Job fears God and they do not.**

While Job's suffering provides the raw material for their debate, the heart of their conflict is over what it means to fear God (Job 4:6, 6:14, 13:11-16, 15:4, 22:4, 23:14-17, etc.). The message of this book is not so much about how to deal with suffering as about how to fear God, even through suffering. Without the fear of God, one must hold to a religious system of cosmic karma, where we're good with God as long as we try to be good people. But the true fear of God acknowledges the possibility – no, the necessity – of innocent, substitutionary suffering. If a really, really good person can suffer terrible things, then maybe, just maybe, the wicked can somehow be justified and made right with God. But it all hangs on both a Redeemer who lives and a tenacious hope of resurrection.

The Friends

Eliphaz is sensitive, Bildad is logical, and Zophar is hot-headed. Their personalities clearly vary, but they are still cut from the same strip of papyrus. They have one ace in their collective hole, and they're not afraid to use it every which way they can.

The summary of their theology is this: Good things happen to good people, and bad things happen to bad people. God is holy, righteous, and good, and he will not allow his cosmic order to be upset by some self-righteous upstart like Job. On the last day, our good deeds will be weighed against our bad deeds, and God will treat us as our actions deserve. There is a place for the wicked, one filled with loneliness, despair, and terror. But it is not possible for bad things to happen to good people. And consequently, it will never be possible for God to find a way to justify the wicked.

Job begins with this same worldview, and Eliphaz begins the cycle by gently reminding him of what he already knows (Job 4:2-5). In fact, Eliphaz claims, this system of belief is what it means to fear God. And such fear of God should be Job's confidence (Job 4:6). Eliphaz will not be so gentle by the time he's done with Job. He'll accuse Job of having no true fear of God (Job 22:4), but of bereaving others, withholding generosity, and crushing the helpless (Job 22:5-11).

These three friends exhaust their arguments and end up in the same place where they began (compare Job 25:4 with Job 4:17). There are different angles on the same

principles, but there is no development of their thought. Perhaps that's why Zophar has nothing to add in the third cycle. Their tone may change as they go, but their belief does not.

Job

Job, however, goes through a radical transformation. He begins in the same place as his friends (Job 4:2-5), but he will not stay there. He knows he is innocent, and yet he's suffering terribly. This blows up everything he thought he knew about God. Notice how his thought progresses through his eight speeches:

- Job 7:8-10: God won't see me anymore after I'm dead.
- Job 9:32-33: I wish I could speak to God in person, but there is no mediator to go between us and make it possible.
- Job 14:7-17: My suffering would have a purpose if I could die and have God's wrath pass me by. Then he could resurrect me and forget all my iniquity. But that will never happen (Job 14:18-22).
- Job 16:18-22: Since I am innocent and God is good, there *must* be a mediator between God and me! My witness is in heaven, he who will argue my case before God as a son of man does with his neighbor!
- Job 19:23-27: Since my Redeemer lives, resurrection must also be possible! Like the dual keys required to launch a nuke, these companion truths of a mediator and a resurrection unlock Job's hope for the first time in the book. "My heart faints within me!" (Job 19:27).
- Job 21:7-9, 29-33: God often allows the wicked to prosper. He can do as he pleases.
- Job 23:8-17: Though he utterly terrifies me, all I want is to see God.
- Job 26:6-7: Even if I die, I will be laid bare and visible before God.

Though the friends end up in the same place they begin, Job does not. He has completely changed his mind.

Suffering in Job

The problem of suffering

All people who live long enough will experience pain and suffering at some point. Our unexpected sorrows lead us to join Job in questioning whether God is playing fair. Questions come easily; answers are hard. Studying the sorrowful story of Job requires us to enter a dark world that is sometimes painfully like our own, with the exception that few modern readers can claim Job's level of personal piety or have suffered comparable losses. We may be more likely than Job to suspect that we may indeed deserve our fate, while Job

was certain of his innocence. Sometimes, like Job, the lesson we learn may be that there are no clear answers or that we have been asking the wrong questions.

Strictly speaking, human misery, or the larger sum of evil in all its forms, is a problem only for the person who believes in one God who is all-powerful and all-loving. Outside such faith there are many explanations of evil which involve a denial, or a limitation, of either God's sovereignty or of his goodness. The argument has been expressed in an attempt to resolve theodicy as follows: If God were perfectly good, he could not tolerate the existence of violence, disease, and evil. Therefore, there must be some limit to his ability to control such events, that is, he is not almighty. Alternatively, if God does have complete power over everything that happens, his failure to curb the wrongs that occur must be due to the fact that he does not see anything wrong in them, that is, he is not good.

Like the rest of the Bible, the book of Job also takes the world seriously. It is God's making, and God's property, and it is good. While God is delighted with all his creatures, human beings are his special friends, for only men share with God the wisdom which is his image in them. A man is able to talk to God, and God answers him. Human existence in this created world, as God's creature, is the place where the goodness of God is supremely displayed and experienced. This is why Job continually insists on a meaningful life, here and now.

But this joyful acceptance of creaturehood, this insistence on seeing the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living, accounts for the reluctance of Job to postpone satisfaction until after death, even though he confidently expects to go on living with God after that event. The moral question central to Job arises from the biblical teaching that a man reaps what he sows—in this life. Rewards for virtue and punishments for vice cannot all be postponed to heaven and hell. But troubles and benefits are not distributed to mankind by an even-handed justice, it would seem. **The wicked prosper, the righteous suffer. Evil is not often punished in proportion to guilt; good is not often rewarded in proportion to merit.**

The apparent injustice of God is seen in the disproportionate share of ills that come to many good people. Experience contradicts the teaching that each person reaps what he sows. Within the accepted framework of common belief that God is sovereign and God is just, Job and the other speakers gather together most of the solutions to this problem which are presented in the Bible. When the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer, something more than a simple doctrine of rewards and punishments is needed.

The Bible, including Job, has several distinct ways of reconciling human suffering with the justice of God. Most of them are heard on the lips of Job's friends, and Job finds them unsatisfactory. But if they are not completely satisfying, and if, in particular, they do not apply in Job's case, this does not mean that they are wrong. What makes this collision of minds so dramatic is the soundness of their views and the cogency of their arguments. The

author has not set up men of straw against Job. To that extent the argument ends in a stalemate, as Elihu recognizes.

3 Biblical Models to Understanding Suffering and Pain

Does God do bad things to good people? How should those who suffer respond to their affliction? Who has not heard those questions before or uttered them for himself or herself? These are perennial questions. What are the answers? That's what we are after!

Consider then that Scripture presents three basic models for interpreting human suffering and for responding to it on the part of the sufferers.

Model 1: Confession and Absolution Approach

God does bad things to bad people, not good people. The book of Judges provides an example. When Israel disobeyed and became idolatrous, God was provoked to anger and punished them by giving them over to their enemies. Israel's proper response was to repent and to return to God for forgiveness. (Amos 4:6-13; Psalm. 38). In this model the bad things represent God's Law at work, which is designed to lead sinners to repentance. The recipients of the curses—or other observers (cf. Luke 13:1-8)—might repent certain actual sins or of original sin, but they should repent. The bad things are a wakeup call from God to attend to their relationship with God.

Model 2: Hope-in-God-Against-God Approach

God does bad things to good people, but the good people refuse to accept the bad things as God's final action. This is seen in the lament psalms (e.g. Psalm 13), Job and Habakkuk. In this model the recipients of the curses do not repent. Rather, they view themselves as members of God's covenant people who have heard and firmly believe God's promises. They are "good" people in that they have been declared good by God's grace and they by faith hold on to the gift of their justified status. Here the problem is not with the sufferers but with God. God seems to be acting strangely, in contradiction to His own promises and His own Gospel nature as the God who is "gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." Therefore, they protest with agonizing questions, "Why have you given me over to my enemies?" and "How long will you hide your face from me?" They do not protest God, per se, but they do protest God's Law at work.

Importantly, they hope in the Gospel against the Law; they appeal to God's mercy over against His wrath. Job expresses it as radically as possible, "Though he slay me, yet I will hope in him" (Job 13:15).

Model 3: Suffering-as-Blessing-in-Disguise Approach

God does bad things to good people, but they ultimately become good things, not bad things. This is a large part of Paul's theology (Rom. 8:28; Rom. 5:3; 2 Cor. 12:9). In these verses the stress lies on the positive purpose of the suffering; God uses it to strengthen faith and reliance upon Him alone. Therefore, sufferers can rejoice in their suffering and receive it as a gift from their loving God. Note that even the lament psalms typically end on a note of praise.

A proper response to the suffering of others

First, be sensitive and be patient. Be attentive to the various emotional stages that a grieving person may go through. It may be shock, or denial, or anger, or depression—or all of them mixed together. Recognize that the suffering person may say things that they would never say in their more rational moments—and that's okay. Just be patient with them. This is not the time for a theology lecture.

Some quick suggestions when you visit a person who is suffering deeply (1) don't minimize their pain; (2) don't glibly quote Bible verses; and (3) beware of saying, "I know how you feel." It's probably not true, and it probably doesn't matter. They don't want to know how you feel; they want to know that you care.

Second, be humble. Don't presume to know more than you do**.** Job's friends thought they knew why Job was suffering, but they were wrong. The truth is, unless God has called you to be a prophet, none of us can know the mind of God in these matters. We cannot judge others based on the fact that they are suffering. Beware of trying to defend God by speaking what is not true. This is what the friends were doing, and Job calls them on it, when he asks**,** "Will you speak wickedly on God's behalf?" (Job 13:7). And this is the exact charge that God will finally bring against them (Job 42:7–8).

Being humble is actually quite freeing. Often we don't visit people who are suffering terribly simply because we don't know what to say. Well, you don't have to know what to say—and you can admit that. How much more helpful Job's friends could have been if they had just done that and not presumed to know more than they did?

Third, be practical. In some cases that may mean acting to protect someone in danger. For example, in situations where the suffering involves abuse of some kind, those who are suffering need more than just a shoulder to cry on; they need someone to call the police.

But more broadly, those who suffer often need practical help when tragedy strikes. People will often say, "If there is anything I can do, don't hesitate to call." That certainly expresses a helping heart, but that just puts a burden back on the sufferer. Much better is actually thinking of something that needs doing and then asking if you can do it—bringing over a

meal, picking up groceries, taking the kids to practice—these are little things that say you care. Offer hope for the future, but very practically help people live one day at a time.

Fourth, be prayerful. You see, the central message of this dialogue with the friends, and in fact of the whole book, is that, in the end, only God himself could bring comfort to Job. The problem of suffering is ultimately intensely personal: we wonder if God really cares. Yes, God can use us as the instruments of his love, but we can't give people who suffer what they need most. That's why we must point them to the love of God, for it is God they need more than us.

Point people to the God who cares—the God who in his Son Jesus Christ has drawn near to us, and, in fact, shares in our suffering. Jesus is a high priest who is able to sympathize with our weaknesses, for he has been tempted in every way, just as we are (Heb 4:15). And in his suffering, he even asks our question—Why? In our prayer for those who suffer, we long to connect them with the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who is able to comfort us in all our troubles (2 Cor 1:3, 4).

The solution / answer to suffering – The Gospel of Jesus Christ

In Job's darkness, we get a glimpse of glorious Gospel light. And we will see that the ultimate answer to the problem of evil and suffering in this world is found in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The body of Jesus forever bears the scars of crucifixion, and they are its chief glory. If the passion of Job was an early sketch of the greatest Sufferer, it remains for his later followers to enter into 'the fellowship of his sufferings' (Phil. 3:10) and joyfully to supply what is still needed to complete the sufferings of Christ (Col. 1:24). For he is the chief Pilgrim and Pioneer of this way, 'a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief' (Isa. 53:3). His Gethsemane was a human experience, but it exceeds all others in its intensity and in its healing power. The full burden of our anxieties crushed him. What Job longed for blindly has actually happened. God himself has joined us in our hell of loneliness and acquired a new completeness through what he endured (Heb. 5:7–9). All the 'meanings' of suffering converge on Christ. He entered a domain of suffering reserved for him alone. No man can bear the sin of another, but Jesus carried the sins of all. As the Substitute for all sinners, his sufferings have borne the death penalty for sin. They were also a full and authentic sharing of our human condition with a love that gave itself completely into the furnace of affliction.

The New Testament brings us to a deeper understanding of God's dealings with suffering. In Jesus Christ, he reveals his love toward his sinful creatures by sending his Son to die on the cross. Jesus Christ is the true innocent sufferer, the only one completely without sin. He voluntarily (as opposed to Job) submits himself to suffering for the benefit of sinful men and women. Andersen, in his commentary wrote, "That the Lord

himself has embraced and absorbed the undeserved consequences of evil is the final answer to Job and all the Jobs of humanity." In Jesus, God enters into the world of human suffering in order to redeem humanity. Jesus experienced the height of human suffering on the cross and he does so with joy (Hebrews 12:2).

Jesus' death on the cross, however, did not bring suffering to an end – at least not in this life. Indeed, Christians are characterized by their sharing in the sufferings of the Lord. To say that Christians are removed from the pain and evil of the present world on the basis of their conversion is a perversion of the Gospel. In 2 Corinthians 1:3-11 Paul likens the sufferings of Christians to that of Christ, in order to communicate the comfort that is available from Christ. It is interesting that he goes on to describe the Christian community as a fellowship of suffering and comfort.

The book of Job retains its power for us today, but it must be read in light of the totally innocent sufferings of Jesus.

Gospel themes in Job

- **Longing for a mediator, friend, intercessor, redeemer, comforter**

Throughout his suffering, Job longs for a witness, an advocate, a mediator, an intercessor, a true friend, and a comforter. He is desperate for a redeemer who will stand for him, but Job is at a loss to know who this could be. He wants to meet with God, but at the same time he is terrified by the prospect. And in several places Job seems to toy with the thought of some legal advocate who could state his case, some witness who could testify on his behalf, even a redeemer who would make his claim before God.

We first see this in Job 9:32-35: ***"For he is not a man, as I am, that I might answer him, that we should come to trial together. There is no arbiter between us, who might lay his hand on us both. Let him take his rod away from me and let not dread of him terrify me. Then I would speak without fear of him, for I am not so in myself."***

Then in Job 16:19-21 he imagines a similar figure, this time called his "witness," his "advocate," and his "intercessor"—a "friend" who will intercede for him. ***"Even now, behold, my witness is in heaven, and he who testifies for me is on high. My friends scorn me; my eye pours out tears to God, that he would argue the case of a man with God, as a son of man does with his neighbor."***

And finally, and most famously, in Job 19:25-27: ***"For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me!"***

Many will immediately recognize the first line of this passage, “I know that my redeemer lives.” We may immediately conclude that this is the high point of Job’s faith. He now understands that a Messiah is coming and that he will be raised with him to experience a full redemption. Not so fast! For one thing, if matters were that clear to Job, then why does he return to his despairing mood for another twelve chapters, never again referring to this glorious revelation? And elsewhere in the book he shows no awareness of life after death. He refers to death as “the path of no return” (Job 16:22; cf. 14:10–12).

No, Job is still wrestling with the deepest question of all. In our pain and suffering, our deepest need is to face God, but how is that possible? In his agony, Job feels that God is bearing down on him, but, at the same time, he knows that only God can rescue him. As he wrestles with the suffering he is enduring, in Job’s mind, God seems to be the problem, but he also knows that only God can be the solution. How can God, who is so terrifying in his power, so overwhelming in his holiness, so vast in his knowledge, how can such a God ever relate to such an insignificant, weak, and ignorant human being like me? Do you see Job’s dilemma here?

Job, in his deep pain, sees the problem, and Job, in his deep longing, points us to the only solution—the solution found in the gospel of the triune God. God in his grace provides his own Son as our mediator, our advocate, and our redeemer. In Christ, God in his love for us satisfies his own wrath against us, and he receives us as his own children. For as Paul says it, “God demonstrates his own love for in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8).

- **Our future hope**

We seek an explanation of suffering in cause and effect. We look backwards for a connection between prior sin and present suffering. The Bible looks forwards in hope and seeks explanations, not so much in origins as in goals. The purpose of suffering is seen, not in its cause, but in its result. The man was born blind so that the works of God could be displayed in him (John 9:3). But sometimes good never seems to come out of evil. Men wait in vain. They find God’s slowness irksome. They lose heart and often lose faith. The Bible commends God’s self-restraint. The outworkings of his justice through the long processes of history, which sometimes require spans of many centuries, are part of our existence in time. It is easier to see the hand of God in spectacular and immediate acts, and the sinner who is not instantly corrected is likely to despise God’s delay in executing justice as a sign that he is indifferent or even absent. We have to be as patient as God himself to see the end result, or to go on living in faith without seeing it. In due season we shall reap, if we do not give up (Galatians 6:9).

There are passages in the Bible which postpone the resolution of the incongruities in God’s moral administration to the last eschatological moment, or even to an occasion beyond history itself. The book of Job is moving in this direction, but its attention is mainly on this

life. Given time, the wicked will receive his just deserts and the righteous will find deliverance and compensation. This teaching, expressed by Zophar in Job 20, puts a strain on Job's faith. He cannot wait indefinitely to see justice done. He contradicts Zophar vigorously (chapter 21). And, even if everything is set right later on, can this ever neutralize the wrong treatment that people have received before that later settlement? The biblical answer is that God (but only God!) can actually transform evil into good, so that in retrospect (but only in retrospect!) it is seen to have actually been good, without diminishing in the least the awful actuality of the evil it was at the time.

If the book of Job cannot take on this full eschatological dimension, it is largely because it does not yet have the achievement of Jesus Christ to include in the picture. For in him the greatest evils, the betrayal and crucifixion of the Son of God, become, and now are, the greatest good for all mankind.

Historical Background

Historical Period

The plot of the Book of Job is definitely set in the patriarchal period. Job is a gentile patriarch much like Abraham. His great wealth is measured in terms of the number of cattle in his possession and servants (slaves) in his employ (Job 1:3; 42:12). He was also the head of a large family for whom he served as priest much as Abraham did for his family. Chapter 1:5 tells us Job offered sacrifices, an act unthinkable after the formal priesthood was established at Sinai. Furthermore, Job's age exceeds those of the patriarchs. We are told he lived 140 years after his restoration (42:16).

Most telling is that Job is a non-Israelite. Uz, while not definitely located, is clearly not within the boundaries of Israel. We assume Job's context is before the Abrahamic covenant, which narrows the covenant community to a particular family. The date of composition is unknown, but there is nothing significant at stake in our lack of knowledge as to author and date.

Date and Authorship

The book itself names no author and claims no definite date for its composition. It is an anonymous work; any assertion about the author or date can only be inferred from the external evidence of the book. The predominately scholarly opinion is that the book of Job is the result of a long process. Scholars believe that the dialogues (Job 3-31) form the basis of the book. At a later point an older prose folktale was divided and used as a frame. Some scholars argue that the speeches of Elihu and Yahweh and the poem to wisdom (28) were even later editions. There is very little agreement, however, in the academic world as to what is original and what is not. A guesstimate of its origin is the 8th century (BC).

Is Job a Historical Book?

Is Job a work of fiction or history? Well, it is not so cut and dry. For example, a book may have a historical core without an intense concern for historical precision. We call such books historical fiction. It is important to bear in mind here that we are asking the question of generic intention, not historical accuracy. That is, does the book of Job intend to be a historical record of an actual event in the past and, if so, how precise does it intend to be?

A number of factors indicate that Job is not pure fiction but is rooted in a historical event. The first lines of the text are often important for genre identification, since they set the tone for what follows. The first verse of Job is similar to the opening verse of Judges 17 and 1 Samuel 1, two passages with undeniable intention to communicate historical events. Second, the man Job is mentioned three times outside of the book, two times (Ezekiel 14:14, 20) along with two other historical figures from the OT, Noah and David. Thus there is a definite historical intention in the book. We are to understand Job to be a real person who lived in the past and who suffered. Obviously, however, there is no way to prove or disprove Job's existence outside of the book that bears his name—for instance, through archaeological attestation.

Although Job intends to be historical, other signals from the book indicate that precision is not a high priority. For instance, the dialogues are all cast in poetic form. Clearly, people do not speak to one another in poetic form, especially when in extreme distress. Also, since we don't have transcripts of their conversations, they may be accurate without being precise. Poetry elevates the book from a specific historical event to a story with universal application. The book of Job is not simply a historical chronicle; it is wisdom that is to be applied to all who hear it.

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Notes

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