

*Wisdom from the depths of despair*  
*Job 1:1-3:26*

**Introduction**

If there is one big objection to the Christians faith and one thing that Christians themselves struggle with it's the issue of God's role in suffering. The inevitable question of "Why has God let this happen?" has undoubtedly come upon the lips of many a follower of Jesus. Of course there are different ways to voice such questions of suffering. There's the questions the philosophers ask and the question the sufferer asks or as Christopher Ash so memorably phrases it in his book on Job there are "armchair questions and wheelchair questions."

The book of Job in the Bible is written for the latter. This book is one of the most astounding pieces of literature ever written on this issue. It tackles the problem of suffering with an emotional honesty, intellectual credibility and wise council that is simply unmatched in any other writings. But Job doesn't give pat answers, in fact Job will very rarely give the answers we want when we are going through hard times. The primary aim of this book and what this book does is give us the resource we need to endure through suffering: Wisdom.

That's the purpose of Job. To teach us wisdom. This is why we need, as Christians, to be familiar with it. Suffering is a guarantee for those who are to live long in the Christian life. Remember Jesus' call to follow him in Mark 8:34-38. Following Jesus means following him on the path of the cross. It's about living a life of suffering service. We need wisdom in order to endure through those hard times. Job himself is a paradigm of patient and wise endurance (James 5:11).

There is much to be said about this complex issue from the book of Job. We are currently preaching through it in Chalmers and it would be helpful to listen to some of these sermons online and spend time yourself reading through the 42 chapters that God in his wisdom gave us with this book. As an introduction to what your appetite this article will bring up three key things that we see in the first 3 chapters of Job that are foundational to understanding the rest of the book.

**1. The innocence of Job's suffering**

What's highlighted from the very beginning of Job is the fact that he is man who is blameless and upright (1:1, 1:8, and 2:3). This does not mean that he was sinless, but it does mean that Job was a man of integrity. His inside matched his outside. What you saw was what you got with Job. He was not only concerned about his own integrity but about his children's integrity(1:5).

In many ways Job is unique in his integrity which is why he becomes the issue of the heavenly showdown in the rest of the chapter. But this key point of his innocence is there to make us wise to the fact that suffering does not necessarily come as a result of doing something bad. There is no such thing as Karma (a fact Job's friends fail to see when they council him). As Christians we need to understand this because If we have lived a life in which we have battled hard to be faithful to God and we suddenly find ourselves going through a horrendous ordeal we can be tempted to think – why me? What have I done to deserve this? Where did I go wrong?

The book of Job informs us suffering is not always some punishment from God for doing wrong. Often suffering comes when we are doing everything right. The correlation between sin and suffering is not always clear cut and obvious (John 9:1-3).

You can walk faithfully with Jesus all your life and it may be that God will lead you into a moment of such darkness that you'll wish you never existed. That is what happened to this man. Why was that? I don't know if we can answer that for everyone. Much biblical wisdom is about recognising our own limitations. But in Job's case we get a peek behind the heavenly curtain as to the sovereign workings of his anguish.

## 2. The test of Job's suffering

These opening chapters of Job flick between two scenes, the earthly scene and the heavenly scene. We see the idyllic earthly scene in 1:1-5 then in 1:6 we get an insight into how God governs the world. An essential question to ask in moments of suffering is how is a world where the innocent suffer governed?

Here we see a kind of heavenly cabinet meeting in which the angels (the sons of God) are gathered together and Satan is among them. Literally in Hebrew it's the Satan – which is the accuser or the adversary.

It seems that the Satan is part of this meeting, part of God's governance. We don't know how and we don't know why. But here is the point the author is making. The adversary, the author of all evil, the tempter and the accuser is ultimately answerable to God. Satan is not God's opposite. He is underneath him and can only act on his authority. Satan is on a leash – the devil is as Martin Luther said "God's Devil." All that happens to Job happens because God allows it. Interestingly in the book of Job that is a point that doesn't seem to be up for debate.

The conversation in the heavenly cabinet meeting is focused on this man Job. God praises his integrity and godliness and in response the Satan throws out a challenge. He basically says to God in 1:9-11 – "Job doesn't really care about you, he doesn't love you. No one does. Job only likes what you've given him. Take that away and let me tell you – he'd curse you to your face."

Surprisingly God responds to this challenge not once but twice, and he lets the Satan inflict Job with terrible sufferings. We can read this and think "What on earth are you doing God? Why are you playing with this man's life?" Certainly that seems like a viable response. However there are two key things we need to take note of first in studying this:

1. Firstly in Satan's accusation God's character and the character of Job himself are being slighted. What's at stake here is the glory and honour of God. The glory of God is more important than anything – even our own personal comforts.

That has to be true for God to be God. He must glorify that which is most glorious and if that is not himself then there would be something greater and more important than him and that would be God. We must also see that there is no dividing line between God's glory and our ultimate benefit. The universe is put to rights when he is glorified. It functions the way it's supposed to. When God is glorified humanity is saved. His greatest act of glory – the cross of Jesus – is testimony to that truth.

2. Secondly what happens to Job will help him to understand the genuineness of his faith and will be used to help countless Christians throughout the ages. He doesn't see this here at this time – but he will.

You know there's something in Satan's accusation that is absolutely bang on. Although his intentions are malicious and wholly evil there's logic in what he says. Maybe Job does just follow God because he's got good things. Maybe Christians don't actually care about God for who he is.

It's sad to say but there are some who live like that. Quite happy to follow God when things are going well in their lives but as soon as suffering comes their way they abandon him altogether. They marry God for his money not him. But Satan doesn't know God's power. He doesn't believe in love. When he comes with this accusation he doesn't realise that he is putting a nail in his own coffin. God only gives Satan enough rope to hang himself.

True followers of God want God for himself not what he can give. Job and countless others are like that. Job's endurance is the Devil's downfall. God permits suffering often to help us and others see that we want him not simply what he can give. It's used to strengthen our faith not destroy it and there is nothing more important than our faith in Jesus.

This is the exact point Peter makes in 1 Peter 1:6-8.

When we go through fiery trials and deep pain and yet can still say through tears with all sincerity Jesus I love you – we drive that nail into Satan’s coffin and bring glory to God’s name. To have that faith – to be able to say “The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord” – that is a precious thing. More precious than all the gold of the world.

### **3. The anguish of Job’s suffering.**

But we can’t leave it there. Because that’s not where Job is.

Job sees no big picture. Job recognises no purpose to what has happened to him. All he can voice, all he experiences, is a hellish pain that seems inescapable.

Get your head into what this man experienced. Can you imagine it? A knock on Job’s door – a policeman standing there with one of Job’s frightened servants. The colour draining from Job’s face as he realises something has gone wrong.

And then he just gets wave upon wave of devastating news. Job has felt the anxiety of losing his job, he’s felt the burden of having his livelihood destroyed and his income ruined. Devastatingly Job has suffered one of the greatest anguishes anyone can experience; the loss of his children. Job has been where some of you have been waiting for the doctor for that diagnosis – fearful for the results. He’s had that debilitating medical condition. Facing emotional, spiritual and physical anguish.

He doesn’t flippantly declare in the face of suffering – “Oh well it’ll all be ok in the end.” He doesn’t know that, he doesn’t feel that. If he did he wouldn’t be real.

In verse 8 of chapter 2 we see him. He’s sitting on a pile of ash. This is literally a reference to the rubbish dump outside the city walls – probably because he’s been ostracised. He’s sitting on a rubbish dumb scraping his painful sores with a broken piece of pottery. He has nothing.

Look at what he says in Job chapter 3 to his friends.

He wants to die. That’s all that he wants. He is surrounded by utter darkness and pain and wants to be killed. There is no feeling of inner peace or comfort. There is no light. Job’s saying “I’m all alone, I can’t sleep, I can’t eat, I can’t rest, I’m in a state of permanent fear.”

We need to be aware that it’s ok to feel like this sometimes. It doesn’t mean there’s anything wrong with you. Sometimes that may be the only appropriate response to what’s happened. Often (especially in church) we like to put a face on and we can feel that everyone else seems to have it all together apart from us. The truth is that we are all broken and if you do feel far from God and in utter blackness and isolation then that doesn’t mean there’s something wrong with your faith.

Job is a follower of Jesus and a good man and this is what he feels. So, if this is you, what can you do? Well, do what Job does. He holds on to God. Even though it may seem like he’s holding on only with his fingertips. He holds on. He cannot escape God. This is not the end for Job. There is much he will come to realise that gives him hope. For now though all he can do is mourn and hold on.

### **Conclusion**

It’s worth noting one final essential point in reading Job. Job, a real man, is nevertheless a prophetic picture of someone else. One who was truly innocent. One who never sinned and never did anything wrong. The prophet Isaiah prophesied his coming, saying that he would be known as “Man of Sorrows –acquainted with grief.” And this man would be struck by God in a way that no human being has ever been. Yet through his suffering humanity would be saved for all eternity and Satan would finally be overthrown forever.

The Lord Jesus Christ is the true obedient suffering servant of God. When we read Job we must see in Job's sufferings not just ourselves but our God and Saviour Jesus. Like Job, Jesus had no inner peace – he too felt this darkness. As he was crucified for our sins, as he was punished on that cross by God his Father for us, he let out a blood curdling cry, "My God, My God why have you forsaken me?"

This changes everything for the suffering Christian. There is no pit of despair that we are in that he has not sunk to. No darkness, no isolation, no tears that he has not experienced. We may feel abandoned by God in times of difficulty, but we can know that we're not. We can know for sure because Jesus literally was abandoned by God so that we would never have to be.

Hold on to him. Keep knocking on his door as Job does. Even if it feels he is not there; as if he has bolted himself away. Hold on to the cross of Jesus. It is our only hope.