

Focal Text

Job 1:1; 1:6—2:10

Background

Job 1:1—2:10

Main Idea

Job's suffering was not what would have been expected to happen to a person who was righteous.

Question to Explore

Does righteous living provide insurance against bad things happening to us?

Teaching Aim

To lead participants to summarize the story of Job and state implications for the questions it raises about suffering

JOB



God and Suffering

Lesson One

When Bad Things Happen to a Good Person

BIBLE COMMENTS

Understanding the Context

Suffering that seems undeserved or out of proportion to its known cause inevitably raises profound personal religious issues. Such suffering tests the truth of our common assumptions about God's ways with human beings and can even threaten the reality of our relationship with God. Suffering can become an experience that draws us into the light of deeper faith or that thrusts us into the dark night of cynicism and despair. It affects our thoughts and our prayers, our wisdom and our worship.

The Book of Job wrestles with the persistent problem of the meaning of personal suffering. The book is based on the experience of the man Job, well known in Jewish tradition for his remarkable faith and personal integrity (see Ezekiel 14:12–20). His story intensifies the issue of the meaning of suffering, for in Job the most terrible things imaginable happen to the finest person one could know. The story thus casts the problem in its most extreme form.

The prose narrative of the book (Job 1:1—2:13; 42:7–17) presents Job's suffering as a test of his motives for faith. Would Job's faith be real if it were not rewarded? The drama of Job turns on

this question: *Is there a faith in God that is genuine, one that is independent of our affluence or poverty and not threatened by our pleasure or pain?* The risk of God, the test of Satan (the Accuser), and the response of Job all seek the answer. Clearly, Job was unaware of the heavenly agreement between God and the Accuser that lay behind his crisis of faith.

The prose narrative affirms the faithfulness of Job in spite of his suffering and the enormity of his loss. His reputation for patience has come from this section. The prose story relates the successful outcome of his crisis without revealing Job's internal struggle and his later honest confrontation with God and his friends about his plight. Yet, to know Job's patience without acknowledging his protests and to accept his affirmations without seeing his agonizing struggle is to have only a superficial knowledge of the man. Many people today readily identify with Job's struggle to find meaning and his search for the reality of God in hard times.

The prolonged struggle of Job emerges clearly in the poetic monologues and dialogues that comprise the heart of the book. These passages are difficult to interpret because they employ ancient poetic imagery and unfamiliar theological argument. The speeches are repetitive, and they often seem to reason in a circle. They are challenging primarily, however, because they grapple with a universal human problem that has defied easy answers and intellectual solutions that are completely satisfying.

Interpreting the Scriptures

Pious and Prosperous (1:1–5)

The prologue makes clear Job was a person of integrity, “blameless and upright” (1:1).¹ His faith was genuine and his conduct above reproach. His motives were sound and his actions transparent. Job should not be understood as self-righteous or concerned merely with ritual correctness. In his extended speech in Job 31:5–35, he testified that his blameless life included more than avoiding evil. He lived with integrity and with a compassion for others that moved him to address injustice.

Job “feared God and turned away from evil” (1:1). The wisdom literature of Israel often refers to the fear of God as the beginning of wisdom and the heart of true religious commitment (see Proverbs 1:7). To fear God was to hold God in reverential awe and respond to God in obedience. Linking the fear of God and turning from evil reflects the

biblical connection between belief and behavior, the profession and the practice of faith. One's relationship with God provides both the means and the motivation for turning away from evil.

The wisdom of ancient Israel linked piety and prosperity. Common tradition held that the righteous would prosper, and prosperity was most often measured by the size of one's herds and the number of one's children. By all counts Job was a prosperous man, and his culture and theology saw this as indisputable evidence of God's blessing on him.

Job provided for his family materially, but he was also concerned for their spiritual welfare. Job 1:4–5 depicts Job's acting as priest for his family, a common practice in patriarchal times. The close relationship among Job's children can be seen in their frequent celebrations and feasts. Job feared these celebrations might have resulted in excess and sinful behavior. He was concerned to "sanctify" his children, which probably involved a ritual of cleansing or purification to prepare them for offering sacrifices to God. Job's consistency in these matters is noted in the words: "This is what Job always did" (Job 1:5). Faithfulness is not genetically passed from one generation to the next, however. Job could offer sacrifices for others but could not ensure they would accept his values or follow his example.

Testing the Motive of Faith (1:6–12)

The Book of Job presents his story through alternating scenes that take place both on earth and in the setting of a heavenly council. From the initial meeting of the heavenly council, one can reach two basic conclusions. First, neither Job nor the other speakers on earth had access to the charges made against him or the agreement of God to allow his suffering. Second, the narrative sees the suffering of Job as being a test of his faith rather than a punishment for his sin. The later speeches of Job and his friends that comprise the body of the book probe the question of whether Job's sin was the primary reason for his suffering.

The heavenly scene pictures God in the likeness of an ancient eastern ruler with his royal court arrayed before him. The "heavenly beings" (1:6), or literally "the sons of God," who make up this assembly have different functions in the work of the kingdom. Some interpreters refer to them as a heavenly court of angels or messengers. In this particular session only one is identified by function. "Satan" is literally translated *the accuser* or *the adversary*. He is portrayed as a kind of royal prosecutor responsible for searching for those who had committed wrongs and bringing them

to account. He is not depicted in this text as a fallen angel or as the being who would come to be fully understood as the evil one or the devil in later Judaism and the New Testament.

In response to the Lord's inquiry concerning his activities, Satan replied that he had been going about his business on earth, but he gave no specific example of what he had done. The Lord asked: "Have you considered my servant Job?" (1:8). Literally, *Have you set your heart upon my servant Job?* The Lord expressed his unconditional confidence in the uniqueness of Job's commitment and character. The Lord's reference to Job as "my servant" placed him among other notable Old Testament figures—patriarchs, kings, and prophets. The Lord then reaffirmed the description of Job given at the beginning of the book.

Satan questioned the motivation that lay behind Job's piety. He posed the question many see as the book's central issue: "Does Job fear God for nothing?" (1:9). Did Job serve God because of who God is or only because of the benefits that came from being faithful? Satan believed self-interest lay at the heart of Job's religion, and he challenged God to remove his blessing and protection from Job to see whether the motivation of his faith were genuine. The scene closes with the Lord's acceptance of Satan's challenge. He granted Satan the permission to strip Job of all that he had, with the limitation that he could not bring him physical harm (1:12).

When Life Tumbles In (1:13–22)

In the aftermath of the heavenly council, Job experienced a tidal wave of misfortune. A succession of events stripped all his possessions from him and brought death to his servants and his sons and daughters. Note that the immediate causes of these catastrophes were both the evil actions of humans and natural phenomena. Job's faith and tradition, however, did not focus on what we see as immediate causes. He understood all that happened to be caused or permitted by God, who was in control of everything. Note especially that he did not even assess blame for these events to Satan.

Job's response to his devastating personal loss was not what Satan had predicted. He did not turn away from God; instead, he worshiped God (1:20–21). He "tore his robe" and "shaved his head," which were traditional symbolic expressions in a ritual of grief for one in mourning. He did not rage against heaven, but rather he "fell on the ground," an expression of humility and submission to God.

Job's words express his personal acceptance of all that had happened to him as coming from God. They convey his belief that his life and all that he possessed were gifts from God. The meaning of his life was not in these things but in the reality of his faith in God. Job's words, "the LORD gave and the LORD has taken away" (1:21), may have been an ancient liturgical blessing to express his praise to God even in the experience of great loss.

"In all this Job did not sin" (1:22). The relationship between sin and suffering is complex. Although sin, turning against God and God's will, brings inevitable consequences that include suffering, one cannot conclude that all suffering therefore comes as a result of one's sin. Job's experience is the classic example of this truth. One may suffer because of the sin of others or because of the condition of the prevailing culture. One may suffer because of natural disasters or seemingly random and accidental events. Clearly, however, the experience of suffering may become the occasion for one's sin. In suffering a person may turn against God and others. Suffering may result in making decisions based on expediency, to ease our pain at the expense of our integrity. Even though Job experienced overwhelming loss, which he could not understand and which he would not forever bear in silence, he continued to affirm his faith and live in obedience to God.

A Second Testing (2:1–10)

Job's experience demonstrates that the testing of our faith is never finished. New commitments bring new challenges, often more intense than any we have faced before. Our past record of resistance to temptation may strengthen us for new trials, but it does not ensure we will be able to overcome them.

In many respects the second chapter of Job is parallel to the first. The Lord affirmed Job in the same terms used in the first encounter. Then, he added that Job "still persists in his integrity" (2:3). The word for "integrity," or *wholeness*, is translated "blameless" in the earlier reference to Job's character (1:1). The Lord charged Satan with attempting to destroy Job "for no reason" (2:3). His accusations had been baseless.

In the first test Satan charged that Job served God only because it was a way to self-aggrandizement. In the second test Satan assumed that Job served God only because it was the way to self-preservation. "All that people have they will give to save their lives" (2:4). The Lord disagreed but permitted Satan's further testing, with the condition that Job's life be spared.

The ensuing suffering of Job involved a most repulsive condition, as sores or boils covered his body. His pain was excruciating; and he also experienced the unwelcome challenge of his wife's taunt: "Curse God and die" (2:9). In all of this, however, Job reaffirmed his faith in God and his expectation that he would receive both good and bad at the hand of God. As in the first testing, the scene closes with the affirmation that Job's suffering did not become the occasion of his sin.

Focusing on the Meaning

People often want to measure the results of faith in material terms. When we read that Job was "blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil" (1:1), we find it easy to believe that he was also materially blessed. It made sense to say to an affluent Job, *You must be living right!* But how could you explain Job's trouble if his religion were real? If faith produces success, its value seems obvious. But what is the worth of faith when it results in suffering rather than material rewards?

Job's story acknowledges that people may do the right thing for the wrong reason. People may avow faith in God because they see this as a way to prosper materially or to achieve social status. Trouble can become a testing ground for the reality of our faith. Job in his loss demonstrated there is such a thing as the unbribed worship of God. For many, however, hard times may reveal that they will *not* "fear God for nothing" (1:9).

How can one find the way to remain faithful in the experience of suffering and loss? Job reminded himself of the gains he had experienced as well as the losses. He placed his suffering in perspective by remembering the blessings of life as well as the suffering. His affirmations in 1:21 and 2:10 reveal a person who knew the therapy of thanksgiving and received life as a gift.

Job's trials demonstrate that to turn away from God in an attempt to find a more satisfying intellectual explanation of suffering is to turn away from the source of the ultimate solution of the problem. Ultimately, the solution to Job's problem of suffering would not be discovered in any explanation of it but rather in the deeper relationship with God he came to experience because of it.

TEACHING PLANS

Teaching Plan—Varied Learning Activities

Connect with Life

1. Make sure everyone has a copy of the *Study Guide*. Lead the class to look at the list of lessons on the contents page and to write in the date each lesson will be studied. List these dates on the marker-board or a poster in advance. (Some classes distribute bookmarks with the dates and lessons listed. Others use e-mail or stickers placed on the *Study Guide* to identify the dates of study.) Guide the class to consider the four units of study and how they relate, underlining significant ideas in the introductory article, “Introducing Dealing with Hard Times: Job, Ecclesiastes, Habakkuk, Lamentations.”
2. In advance, ask a class member who enjoys doing research to prepare a two-minute report on the ideas about date and authorship of the Book of Job. After the report has been presented, ask the class to read paragraph three in the introductory article titled “Introducing Job: God and Suffering.” The paragraph begins, “Job is part of the wisdom literature. . . .” Refer to the Question to Explore for lesson one: “Does righteous living provide insurance against bad things happening to us?”

Guide Bible Study

3. Ask participants to work in pairs to complete the following handout. (Download at www.baptistwaypress.org.)

What Do You Know About Job?

Check all of the sentences you think are correct about Job.

- a. Job was a person of great wealth.
- b. Job lived in the same place that was later visited by a girl named Dorothy.
- c. Job was a man who never sinned.

- ___ d. Job was the greatest man of all the people in the east.
- ___ e. Job feared God and turned away from evil.
- ___ f. Job had seven daughters and three sons.
- ___ g. Job was described as “no one like him in all the earth.”
- ___ h. Job believed that he prospered because God blessed righteous people.
- ___ i. Job was a patient man.

Review the answers and use the responses to lead a discussion of the attributes of Job found in Job 1:1–5.

4. Prepare in advance a script for a dramatic reading of the focal verses for this lesson (download at www.baptistwaypress.org). Enlist readers who will read the following parts: Narrator, The Lord, Satan, Messenger 1, Messenger 2, Messenger 3, Messenger 4, Job, and Job’s wife. If the class is small, readers could be assigned more than one part or the four messenger parts could be combined. Ask the class to listen for the events of the story as the reading is presented.
5. Read and discuss the *Study Guide* article titled “Satan” to consider one explanation about Satan being a part of the heavenly beings that have access to God. If class members bring Bibles representing various translations, invite them to share different ways Job 1:6 is translated. Ask, *What does Job 1:7 suggest about Satan’s activity in the world then and now?* Read Job 1:9, and point out the significance of Satan’s question in light of the overall study. Ask the class to respond to question 3 at the end of the lesson in the *Study Guide*.
6. Write “What Job Lost” at the top of the markerboard, and ask the class to search Job 1:13–19 to find what the messengers told Job about his losses. List these losses on the board as they are shared. Read Job 1:20–21 and discuss Job’s reaction to his losses. Encourage the class to scan Job 2:1–8. Guide the class to discuss responses to the following questions:
 - How might people today react to such losses?
 - What are some differences in the way Christians and non-Christians might deal with such losses?
 - How might people react differently when faced with personal physical problems?

- What do these Scripture passages reveal about Job’s grief?
 - What lessons from this passage could Christian people learn about grief when they experience losses related to possessions, family, and health?
7. Lead the class to look at Job 2:9–10 and discuss possible reasons Job’s wife advised Job to “Curse God, and die.” Ask, *How does Job’s reaction reveal Job’s belief that all experiences, good and bad, are the result of God’s justice? What are some examples that suggest some people still believe this way?*

Encourage Application

8. On the reverse side of the handout distributed in step 3, print “Implications about Suffering” from this Bible passage. (Download at www.baptistwaypress.org.)

Implications About Suffering

- _____ Suffering is experienced by both believers and non-believers.
- _____ God sometimes allows suffering to test a believer’s faith.
- _____ Suffering sometimes forces believers to test their convictions and mature in their faith.
- _____ To be human and to live in this world with other people is to be exposed to suffering and pain.
- _____ While all evil and sin have consequences, not all suffering is the consequence of sin.
- _____ Grief is a normal emotion that can be a healthy way to deal with suffering.

Encourage everyone to read the list and select at least two implications that have special meaning. Discuss these implications as members share the statements chosen. Close with prayer for people who are suffering today.

Teaching Plan—Lecture and Questions

Connect with Life

1. Make sure everyone has a *Study Guide*. Before class write the dates for each lesson on the markerboard or a poster, and ask everyone to date the lessons on the contents page. (See step 1, “Teaching Plan—Varied Learning Activities,” for other ideas for helping class members be aware of the dates the lessons will be studied.) Bring to class four or five clippings from recent newspapers containing stories about tragic events in the lives of people. Point out that the study of Job will help the class answer questions about tragedies that occur in the lives of both righteous and unrighteous people. Review some of the content in the introductory article titled “Introducing Dealing with Hard Times: Job, Ecclesiastes, Habakkuk, Lamentations.” Ask members to underline significant ideas in the article.

Guide Bible Study

2. Present a short lecture about the Book of Job using “Introducing Job: God and Suffering” in the *Study Guide* and introductory information in “Bible Comments” in this *Teaching Guide*. Give special attention to the popular religious belief of the day that suffering was the result of sin. Ask, *What are some examples that this belief is still prevalent today?* Post the outline of the lesson on the focal wall as follows:

When Bad Things Happen to a Good Person

A Man Named Job (1:1)
Testing, Testing (1:6—2:10)

3. Read Job 1:1. If you have a map, point out a possible location of the land of Uz. Refer to Lamentations 4:21 as a possible way to identify this location (associated with Edom). List other facts about Job as given in Job 1:2–5.
4. Enlist a volunteer to read Job 1:6–12. Ask the class to look at the short article in the *Study Guide* titled “Satan.” Review this article

to present at least one idea for why Satan was a part of the heavenly beings. Lecture briefly on the significance of the question Satan asked in verse 9, “Does Job fear God for nothing?” Lead the class to respond to question 3 at the end of the lesson in the *Study Guide*.

5. Instruct the class to listen for Job’s tragic losses as a volunteer reads Job 1:13–19. Invite another volunteer to read Job 2:1–9. On the markerboard, write “Possessions,” “Family,” “Other.” After the readings, ask participants to mention what Job lost. List the responses under the headings.
6. Read Job 1:20–22 and 2:10 to show how Job handled his losses. Ask, *How might other people respond?*

Encourage Application

7. Use the suggestions in the *Study Guide* titled “Practical Insights from Job’s Experience” and the small article “Applying the Experience of Job” to state some implications for the questions this story raises about suffering. Consider evaluating the “Implications About Suffering” in step 8 of the other teaching plan. Invite participants to share thoughts and experiences they or their acquaintances have had related to suffering. Allow the class to share the names of people who are suffering, and close with a prayer for them.

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotes in lessons 1–6 on Job are from the New Revised Standard Version.