

Introduction to Job

The book of Job is one of the hardest books in the Bible to understand, yet it is a story that we will all be very familiar with.

At forty-two chapters long we are obviously not going to be able to go into huge amounts of detail in this study. What I want to do is give an overview of the book and its application to us today.

As literature Job is a masterpiece. One famous English poet has called it “the greatest poem, whether of ancient or modern literature.” It is a very cleverly written and put together book. With the exception of the first two chapters and part of the last one, the book is written in the form of Hebrew poetry. The opening and closing are historical prose which puts the poetry in its context.

Yet many Christians struggle with the book. They struggle with God permitting Satan to unleash attack after attack on one of his people; they struggle with the advice of Job’s friends – how they are meant to understand it and they struggle with Job’s apparent self-righteousness.

That is why it is so good to have the New Testament writings to constantly remind us to have a proper attitude as we approach the study of Job. Paul wrote in Romans 15vs4 – “For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”

Job was written to instruct us, to give us hope and to teach us to be patient. That was exactly the lesson that the Apostle James took from the book. He wrote in James 5vs10 – “As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.”

Because it is so relevant to our everyday struggles in our Christian walk in this world we should certainly take the time to get to grips with this book.

The Place of Job in the Old Testament

Many Bible scholars tell us that the style of the literature in Job points to the fact that this was one of the earliest if not the earliest books of the Bible to be written. It is thought that he lived at the same time as Jacob. (Based on the fact that Eliphaz was a Temanite (2vs11) a descendent of Esau).

Although it is a history book in that everything that is recorded in it actually took place, it is not a history of the people of Israel and its message comes from the fact that it is what we call wisdom literature. There are five books of poetry which are wisdom literature in the Old Testament and their message can be summarised as follows:

- Job – How to suffer
- Psalms – How to pray
- Proverbs – How to act
- Ecclesiastes – How to enjoy
- Song of Songs – How to love

That summary is an over simplification of what each of those books teach us, but it is still a useful outline.

Outline of the Book

Part 1 – introducing Job: 1vs1-5

The opening verses of the book introduce us to Job. He was a man who lived in the land of Uz which was probably to the east of Israel somewhere on the border of present day Jordan, Iraq and Saudi Arabia.

The verses tell us two more things about Job:

- He was rich; and
- He was a truly godly man. He is described in priestly language as the one who intercedes on behalf of his family.

Part 2 – The heavenly court: 1vs6-12

The scene then changes and we are taken up to heaven where the angels have come to present themselves to God and this includes the rebellious angels as we read that Satan is there. We read in vs.8 that it is God who initiates Satan's consideration of Job. Only after God has raised the subject, do we read of Satan's response – "The only reason Job trusts you is because you have made his life so easy and comfortable. Take it all away and he will curse you."

Satan is throwing a challenge down to God – "Job will not stay loyal to you when he loses everything you have given him." And God takes up the challenge and tells Satan that he can strike everything that belongs to Job.

Part 3 – Disaster strikes: 1vs13-20

And so Satan does strike literally everything that Job has. Wave after wave of devastation floods over him. If the blows had not fallen so suddenly and in such quick succession he might have had time to cope with one before the next one burst upon him. But there was no break. Each comes one after the other with merciless ferocity.

All his livestock are taken or destroyed. All the servants who were with them are killed. And then the dreadful fourth message arrives with news of a terrible natural disaster – a hurricane which killed all ten of Job's children. Not one escaped.

This is the first crunch time in terms of Satan's challenge to God. How would Job respond – "Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. And he said, 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.'"

What a response this is. Job does not just resign himself to what has happened – rather he declares the goodness and glory of God. The greatness of his loss makes him aware of the greatness of God's kindness in giving such blessings in the first place. This is a staggering and revolutionary way to think about suffering and affliction.

Part 4 – Back in the heavenly court: 2vs1-6

Again we read that it is God who raises the subject of Job and in response we see Satan making excuses for Job's continued trust in God. It is because you wouldn't let me afflict his body. Let me do that then he will curse you. And again we read that God accepts Satan's challenge.

Part 5 – Disaster strikes again: 2vs7-10

Satan afflicts Job with a dreadful disease and Job is a picture here of utter misery in pain and discomfort scraping his body with anything he can lay his hands on to try and relieve the pain. His whole body is covered in burning sores. There are numerous references to his physical condition throughout the rest of the book and what he was suffering was truly awful.

His wife sees him in his suffering and any trust she might have had in God evaporates and she berates Job urging him to curse God and end his life. The suffering is too much. But Job once more responds in faith and trust – “You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?”

In all this Job had no insight into what was going on behind the scenes in heaven. He did not benefit from what we are told. He did not know that he was being used to honour God before the accusations of Satan. But despite not knowing, he remained faithful.

Part 6 – Job’s friends arrive: 2vs11-13

Three of Job’s friends arrive to comfort him. When they get there they are so overwhelmed by the sight of Job’s condition that they sit on the ground in silence for seven days. There was nothing they could say.

Part 7 – Job’s patience is exhausted: 3vs1-26

It is from this point onwards that the book turns from narrative to Hebrew poetry. The continuing pain and suffering leads to Job pouring out his heart. He complains. He complains about the fact that he was ever born. He longs for death and he asks why one who is suffering so much should live when life is so utterly unbearable.

Part 8 – Discourse with the three friends: 4vs1-26vs14

This is the largest section of the book and it further breaks down into three sections where each of Job’s friends speak in turn and Job replies to them to refute what they say to him. The third section is truncated with only Eliphaz and Bildad speaking and being answered. The debates that they have are quite heated at times.

I want to spend a bit of time in this section because it can be hard to know what we are to think of what the friends say to Job, but it is vital that we understand it if we are to grasp the learning from the book.

The three friends are not clones of each other and there is a measure of development in what they say as they go through the three cycles of speeches. But having said that the same themes and main points come up time and again.

It is clear, particularly as the speeches unfold that the three friends are not impressed with Job. Bildad (the second of the three) comes across as sharp and short tempered – 8vs2: “How long will you say these things, and the words of your mouth be a great wind?” The other two are very similar. While Job’s appearance had made his friends sad, his words made them angry.

Why? Because as the exchanges go on, Job repeatedly insists that he is not being punished for some particular sin, for he has nothing on his conscience that could justify this treatment by God. So it seems that God is being unfair. This makes them angry and they wish that Job would just shut up and listen.

But it is also clear from these exchanges that Job is not impressed with his comforters. The antipathy and the frustration are mutual. Job had hoped for refreshment from them, but he likens them to a riverbed to which a parched traveller turns aside only to find that it is dry as dust. (6vs14-30). He calls them a bunch of “miserable comforters” (16vs2) and “windbags” (16vs3).

Job’s responses are full of sarcasm – “No doubt you are the people and wisdom will die with you.” (12vs2). Oh, yes, you are so wise! You are where wisdom is at. When you die I am really worried that there won’t be any wise people left in the world!

Job feels that he is being tormented by his friends rather than helped. He says that they “break him in pieces with words” (19vs2).

For 24 chapters Job and his friends have a blazing row. So who is right to be angry?

In 42vs7 we have God’s assessment of what has been said. In this chapter God is speaking to Eliphaz – “My anger burns against you and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of me what is right.” God was not impressed with Job’s comforters. The anger of job at his friends is an echo of the anger of God that burns against them.

So when we read the nine chapters of the Bible containing their speeches we are reading things that made God angry. It is important that we grasp this as it will help us to understand them. Because when we read them it is not always immediately obvious that there is anything wrong with what they say. There are large parts of what they say with which we would naturally agree.

If what they said was total rubbish it would be far easier for us as we read the chapters. But the worst kinds of false teaching are very rarely obviously rubbish. They are the most dangerous because they are nearly true.

So, I want us to consider briefly the friends’ system of theology, their pastoral tone and the things that they do not say.

Their system of theology

The theology that underlines all three friends is very simple and clear.

- God is absolutely in control.
- God is absolutely just and fair.
- Therefore God always punishes wickedness and blesses righteousness. If he were ever to do otherwise he would be unjust, which is inconceivable.
- Therefore, if I suffer I must have sinned and am being punished justly for my sin.
- And, presumably, if I am blessed I must have been good – although this isn’t relevant here so they don’t develop this side of it.

This logic undergirds almost all that they say. 4vs7 – “Who that was innocent ever perished?” Eliphaz and his friends are therefore sure that Job has sinned because they see that job is suffering.

And the friends pursue this logic with a remorselessness. In 8vs4-7 Bildad applies it Job’s children – “So your children died did they Job? Well that means they must have sinned.” Bildad is telling Job that it may not be too late for him to repent. Zophar then picks up on this theme in chapter 11 and goes further – “Know that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves.” Job – count yourself lucky that you are not dead like your children and that you still have the opportunity to repent!

And all of these exhortations are based on this logical but fundamentally flawed world view that unless God is just and fair as they see it the moral fabric of the universe will disintegrate. There was no room in the friend's thinking for any exceptions to this rule.

So in chapter 22 Eliphaz runs out of patience with Job and tells Job precisely what is wrong – “Is not your evil abundant? There is no end to your iniquities.” “And I’ll be specific Job, since you force me to it. You’re a rich man aren’t you Job. Well don’t expect us to believe that you got rich quite as honestly and justly and kindly as you would have us think. Come clean you hypocrite!” And all of this is followed up by repeated calls to repent.

This is the theological system of the friends. And it is one which is very common today among those who are Christians and those who are not. The father of one of my school friends died a while ago after suffering very badly with cancer. My friend kept saying to me that he didn’t understand why God had let his father suffer so much after the good life that his father had lived as a minister in the Methodist church.

What are we to make of this theological system? We cannot just dismiss it out of hand as something which is wholly ridiculous. The first two parts of the friend's formula are absolutely right. God is absolutely in control and God is absolutely fair and just.

Further, we need to recognise that there are many ways in which we may find that we do suffer as a direct consequence of our own sin. In Psalm 32 the psalmist says that when he kept his sin secret, the pressure of unresolved guilt was destroying him physically. Only when he confessed it and turned from it did his health return. If I get drunk and drive and crash my car and so injure myself, it is my fault. If I commit adultery and this leads to misery as my marriage falls apart, that misery is the direct result of my sin.

If someone hurts me and I refuse to forgive them and I nurse resentment and become a hard and bitter person, the resulting damage to my character is my fault because I ought to forgive.

But this is not always the case. It is not a hard and fast rule of the way that the world operates. We know this from Job because three times in Job 1 and 2 we are told that Job is “blameless.” So the comforters make a big mistake. Job does not need to repent for any sin that led to his suffering. He is not being punished for sin and to say that to him for nine chapters adds a cruel burden to his grief.

Their Pastoral Tone

So that is their system of theology. Next I want us to think about their pastoral tone. They are absolutely dogmatic in their assertions. But their dogma does not come from God. Instead they rely on tradition. Bildad claims this in chapter 8. Then in chapter 15 they rely on their seniority to Job – they pull rank on him. And they get increasingly angry with Job. Telling him that he is spouting hot air and that he just needs to be quiet and listen.

But in their tone and in their content there is a lack of honesty. They are either wilfully or negligently blind to the realities of what is going on in the world around them and they refuse to let the evidence get in the way of what they believe. But they ought to because God's truth will always fit with God's world. But instead of this there is an air of unreality about their theology.

The next thing we see about their tone is that they have very little sympathy. They are sorry for him at the start, but they don't understand his pain. They are more attached to their theories than to Job their friend. So in 4vs2-5 we read Eliphaz saying something along these lines – “I can't quite see why you should be so miserable Job. You used to be the one offering comfort to others, and I must admit

you were very good at it. Well, that wasn't so difficult when you were suffering when you weren't suffering; but now it's your turn and you don't like it do you."

There is no attempt to come alongside Job and that shows that they don't really love Job. They do not listen to his cries. The cycle of speeches are like dialogues in which one side (the friends) are deaf to the cries and protestations of the other. They do not respond to what Job says and do not engage with him as a fellow human being in need.

The things they don't say

As we said at the start of this section, so much of what the friends say looks right and that is what causes us difficulty in our reading of the book. But there is a problem with the content of what they say as well as their tone and attitude. And the problem with the content is primarily related to what they don't say rather than what they do.

This is so often the case with false teaching and we need to be on the lookout for this. One of Phil's favourite examples is the teaching that is prevalent in England that says – "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him might have eternal life." It is all true but something vital is missing.

There are three things that are missing. Firstly there is no place in their thinking for Satan. We know from the prologue to the book that Satan is a real and influential person. We know the whole tragedy that Job is suffering has its origin in the argument in heaven between Satan and God. In their thinking evil is purely a human phenomenon. It has no spiritual dimension. There is no spiritual battle.

There are hints in Job's replies that he does understand something of this. In ch.3 and 26 where he talks about Leviathan and the serpent monster Rahab.

The second thing that is missing from the friends is any concept of waiting. They live in a McDonalds world where they think that everything is instant. The wicked are punished here and now and the righteous are blessed here and now. This is a "live-for-now" existence with no future hope on which to set one's eyes. That is not what the bible teaches about God and his promises.

And the third element that is missing from the friend's speeches is any concept of innocent suffering. For them if the righteous were ever to suffer it would be a great blot on the moral landscape. As we have already quoted, Eliphaz says in 4vs7 – "Who that was innocent ever perished?" Can you think of anyone? The Lord Jesus Christ. If the innocent never suffered then you and I would not be here today and we would have no hope for the future

Now that is not to say that Job is an Old Testament type of Christ but the book of Job prepares for the suffering of the innocent that is so central to the unfolding gospel of God. But the three friends saw and understood none of this.

Job's responses

Job answers each of the friend's speeches. But in his answers he interchanges between addressing them and addressing his speech directly to God.

In his speeches he not only defends himself against the unjust accusations of his friends but he also challenges God and even accuses God. 9vs16-17, 9vs23, 13vs15.

Yet in the midst of his anguish there are also words of hope. Despite all that has happened to him and apparent hopelessness of his cause in being able to get an audience with God, interspersed throughout his speeches are his longing for and confidence that he will have a mediator who will speak on his behalf and plead his cause for him.

We see this progression if we look at 9vs33-35, 16vs28-19 and 19vs23-27. In the midst of the darkness there are beams of light. They come and they go – swallowed up in misery and depression – but there is hope.

Part 9 – Job’s proclamations: 27-31

Continues in much the same vein as Job’s responses to his friends. In ch.27vs2 Job accuses God of denying him justice. 30vs20-21 – accuses God of being cruel. He longs for the opportunity to make his case to God knowing that God will listen to him but he no longer has confidence that God will listen.

Part 10 – Elihu enters the discussion: 32vs1-37vs24

Elihu is a fourth friend who it now becomes clear has been there all along listening to everything else that has been said. He tells us that he has not said anything before because he is quite a bit younger than all the other men and he kept quiet out of respect, but now he has to speak.

And he is an angry young man. He is angry with the three friends because they have not answered Job properly. And he was also angry with Job because he had justified himself rather than God (32vs2). Elihu gives four unanswered speeches. They begin in ch’s 32, 34, 35 and 36 with the phrase – “Then Elihu answered and said.”

And the big theme that runs through Elihu’s speeches is the greatness and justice of God. What are we to make of him. For many commentators – the vast majority – Elihu is just like the other three friends and they condemn him out of hand. But it is very interesting to note that God does not condemn Elihu at the end of the book.

In 42vs7 God is explicit in speaking to Eliphaz – “My anger burns against you and against your two friends.” Only those three were told to offer a burnt offering and Job was only to make intercession for them, not Elihu. So God does not condemn Elihu.

And there is no answer from Job to Elihu. After Elihu’s fourth speech God starts to speak. It is almost like Elihu was the warm-up act for God. And, as we will come on to see, God essentially says much the same as Elihu does. Understanding Elihu like this he is a bit like John-the-Baptist was to Jesus.

On reflection this is the view I take although it is not one I would defend with my life. But as I read it Elihu does not say that Job is suffering because of specific sin, but he does charge Job with sinning in his response to his suffering.

Part 11 – The Lord speaks: 38vs1-41vs34

These chapters are a truly amazing section of the Bible. They are some of the Bible’s most powerful poetry. The section begins with the awesome introduction to God – “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.”

And as the section goes on, God forcefully makes the point that Job, as well as every other human being, has great ignorance about the mysteries of the universe. In the first part of his speech God

asks Job a series of questions about how the natural world works – questions which Job is unable to answer.

If he is unable to explain the ordinary and well-known facts of natural history and science, how can he hope to understand and interpret the mystery of the Creator's dealings with his creation or his treatment of his children?

The Lord sets out a whole range of natural phenomena about which, even to this day, we know so little and certainly cannot control. He not only challenges Job as to his knowledge and understanding, but also as to his power and control. So we read in 38vs31 – “Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades or loose the cords of Orion? Can you lead forth the Mazzaroth in their season, or can you guide the Bear with its children? Do you know the ordinances of the heavens? Can you establish their rule on the earth? Can you lift up your voice to the clouds, that a flood of waters may cover you? Can you send forth lightnings, that they may go and say to you, ‘Here we are?’”

What is the point that God is making? He is saying to Job – “You have questioned the way that I am running the world, but what do you really know about how the world operates? You are in no position to think that you know better than me.”

During the middle of God's speech there is a short interlude from Job as he is overawed by God in 40vs3 – “Then Job answered the Lord and said: ‘Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but I will proceed no further.’”

Then God goes on in ch.40 with the second part of his speech where he talks about Behemoth and Leviathan. Again, there is much debate as to exactly what God is talking about. Some think that God is describing two fierce animals (a hippopotamus and a crocodile) others that these are pictures of superbeasts that represent Satan and his cohorts.

The focus of this second speech of God is not on the government of the world but on God's justice. We see this in 40vs7-14. God challenges Job – so you think you can do a better job of administering cosmic justice? Well let's think about Behemoth and Leviathan. And then he launches into the descriptions. In that context it seems hard to know what relevance a hippo and a croc are.

It seems far more likely therefore that God is describing the forces of terrifying evil that operate in the universe. And what God shows is that he and he alone is capable of exercising sovereign, meaningful justice over them – that great and powerful as they are, he is greater and more powerful still.

Part 12 – Job responds to God: 42vs1-6

Lets read these verses – “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. ‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’ Therefore I have uttered what I did not undersand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. ‘Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you make it known to me.’ I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.”

The first speech of God silenced him, the second utterly stunned him into repentance. Job has been humbled by God and senses his appalling ignorance. But he has also found a peace – a God-given peace – even though all his questions have not been answered. He now knows that he and his sufferings have got their place in God's all-wise, incomprehensible providence. Job knows that he does not need to understand. He needs no explanation.

God is on his throne. God will do what is best. That is to be enough for Job, and that is to be enough for every child of God. Job regrets his questioning and complaining. He repents and yields gladly to the rule of an all-glorious and all-gracious God.

Part 13 – The Conclusion: 42vs7-17

The final scene pictures the Lord rebuking the three friends. He commands them to take sacrifices and to go to Job so that Job might function as a priest and pray for them. Thus the Lord vindicates the integrity of Job before his friends, his family and all who read of him. Job is richly blessed and ultimately dies “an old man and full of days.”

Application

All about God: God works out his promises in his own way.

Worldly wisdom cannot explain this

Therefore we have to trust God even in the darkest times.

Those dark times are frequent:

- We often suffer.
- We sometimes understand.
- We can always trust.