

Beginning Words [from the Preface section]

The book of Job cuts straight to the heart of what it means to be human. It is the most profound exploration of the life of faith ever written, and wrestles with some of life's most perplexing questions: *Why do bad things happen to good people? Why do good things happen to bad people? Is there a correspondence between sin and suffering, obedience and blessing? Can God be trusted? Why should we serve God if there are no guarantees?*

There was never a time when the book of Job was not relevant, but it is especially relevant in a post-9/11 world. This is not because the book of Job has changed, but because we have. We may be more ready to listen now, less certain of our own answers. Perhaps every generation has an experience that makes this possible. In any case, the images that seared onto the world's consciousness that sunny day in September introduced many of us to a different, deeper version of ourselves. So, when Job asks *why*, we, too, strain to hear the answers.

And if answers are not forthcoming, then we, like Job, at least need to know how to live without them.

So we look to Job. Yet, right away we encounter another difficulty. If we were expecting an instruction manual for life, then this is a strange one. There are no neat propositions to be learned, no lists of easy answers. Like Jacob's divine opponent on the banks of the River Jabbok (Genesis 32), Job makes us wrestle for our blessing. Whatever wisdom is hidden in these chapters comes to us amidst convoluted arguments and cosmic bets. The harsh realities of this book have been enough to frighten off even some of the most enthusiastic seekers.

So, not only is the book of Job one of the most important books of the Bible, it is one of the most difficult. Or perhaps we should say "challenging." This study will try to help you meet that challenge. Each of the seven sessions is designed to guide you through a different section of the book of Job. They are not nearly so daunting when approached one by one. And as we become familiar with each, the whole book will come into focus in a way that may surprise even some veteran readers of the book.

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Summary

This introductory chapter addresses four questions:

- 1) How does the book of Job relate to life?
- 2) How does the book of Job relate to the rest of the Old Testament?
- 3) How does the book of Job relate to history?
- 4) How does the book of Job relate to inspiration?

Job's relationship to life is clear from its concerns about whether God rewards good behavior with blessing and punishes bad behavior with suffering. Its relationship to the rest of the Old Testament is summarized by its identification as part of the wisdom literature. Its relationship to history is discussed in the context of the book's long and complicated history of composition. Finally, we celebrate the book's inspiration and its potential as a faithful resource for the life of faith.

Basic Bible References

Job 1–2
42:7–17
19:1–3
7:11
Proverbs 2:20–3:26
10:3–4
Psalms 1 and 34
Ecclesiastes 8:14–9:3, 11

Word List

Retributive justice
Wisdom literature
Prologue
Epilogue
Folk tale



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Introducing Job: the Book and the Man

Crime and Punishment?

Moonlight filters through the trees, washing the gazebo in a translucent halo of blue. Inside the gazebo a man and a woman stand facing each other, hands clasped in a stunningly romantic silhouette. Softly, the woman begins to sing, “Somewhere in my youth or childhood, I must have done something good.”

This, of course, is a description of the scene made famous by Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *The Sound of Music*. While it may seem like an odd place to begin a study of the book of Job, it actually introduces us to one of the central issues in the book. Beneath the surface of those familiar lyrics lie some age-old assumptions about reward and punishment—issues that Job wrestles with as well.

What are these assumptions? Put simply: that good behavior is rewarded and bad behavior is punished. While most of us do not make them consciously (that’s what makes them assumptions!), we make them nonetheless. When things are going well, we conclude with the moonlit Maria that somewhere in [our] youth or childhood [we] must have done something good. Conversely, when tragedy strikes, we wonder, “What did I do to deserve this?”

The technical term for such assumptions is *retributive justice*. In the book of Job, this doctrine is defended by Job’s so-called friends. After Job is stricken by a series of sudden disasters, they draw what to them is the obvious conclusion: Job has sinned and is

being punished by God. Job, however, maintains his innocence, and insists that his misfortune is more than just a matter of crime and punishment.

An Ongoing Debate

The relationship between sin and suffering has been the subject of centuries of debate within the community of faith. We can hear echoes of that debate all through the Old Testament, but particularly in those books belonging to what is called the wisdom literature. The book of Proverbs contains many maxims that favor the traditional crime and punishment view. Read, for instance, **Proverbs 2:20–3:26** and **10:3–4**. Some of the psalms take this stance as well. Read **Psalms 1** and **34**.

Another wisdom book, Ecclesiastes, takes a less confident tack. There, the author bemoans the fact that the same fate seems to befall both the righteous and the wicked. Read **Ecclesiastes 8:14–9:3, 11**. He concludes that it is impossible for human beings to understand such experiences. “However much they may toil in seeking, they will not find it out,” he writes in 8:17. “Even though those who are wise claim to know, they cannot find it out.”

Both extremes in the debate are represented in the book of Job. The friends represent the traditional position, while Job protests life’s inequities in much the same way as the author of Ecclesiastes does.

The different stances may be reflected in more subtle ways as well, however. Some believe that the book’s structure reflects this ongoing debate. According to this view, the prose prologue (Job 1–2) and the prose epilogue in 42:7–17 reflect the more traditional stance. Read **Job 1–2** and **Job 42:7–17** now. The poetic dialogues that comprise the rest of the book represent an attempt to wrestle with the issues on a more nuanced level.

This brings up the question of how the book of Job came together in the form with which we are familiar. Let’s take a moment to consider this question before we join in on the age-old debate about sin and suffering.

A Community Project

Modern readers of ancient books are often misled by current understandings of authorship. In an age of copyrights and royalties, this is understandable. Yet, ancient books were seldom the product of a single author. Sometimes it took the contributions of several

generations of authors and editors to shape the books that have been handed down to us. The book of Job is a particularly good example of this kind of group project.

From all indications, the book of Job has a long and complicated history. It probably started out as a popular folk tale about a righteous man who suffered much. We can see a written version of this folk tale in the prologue of our present book of Job. Some scholars think that the happy ending of the epilogue also reflects this original tale.

The poetic dialogues between Job and his friends in the body of the book may represent a later expansion on the oral version of this ancient story. Perhaps they were designed to flesh out the theological questions raised by the original folk tale.

Some have suggested that the speech of Elihu in 32:1–37:24 represents yet another layer of the book’s composition. It does rather interrupt the flow of the book, insinuating itself smack into the middle of Job’s call for a confrontation with God (chapter 31) and God’s response (chapters 38:1–42:6). It may be that Elihu’s speech represents the perspective of someone who thought he could do a better job of defending the traditional sin/suffering stance than Job’s friends do. In the opinion of most scholars, it does not.

This layered character of the book does help to explain certain inconsistencies in its final form. Job’s friends, for instance, are models of quiet compassion in the prologue (see Job 1:13). In the poetic dialogues, however, the friends add to Job’s agony with their accusations (see **Job 19:1–3**). Job’s character is strangely at odds with itself in the final form as well. The prologue portrays him as a model of patience and piety (see Job 1:20–22; 2:9–10). The poetic dialogues, on the other hand, present him as impatient and bitter (see **Job 7:11**).

In short, there is good reason to believe that the book of Job was written by more than one person over the course of a considerable period of time.

Faith and Fiction

In light of the above description of the book’s composition, some have suggested that the book of Job, as we now have it, is better classified as literature than history. This does not mean that a man named Job never existed. It does acknowledge, however, that by the time even the earliest layers of our present book of Job came into being, Job’s story had achieved legendary status.

What are the implications of such an acknowledgment for faith? If we classify the book of Job as literature, does this mean that it is somehow less inspired?

Perhaps the first step toward answering these questions is to examine the ways in which literature is true. Great literature (and the book of Job most certainly qualifies) can be profoundly true without necessarily being factual in an historical sense. This is why we can come away from reading certain works of fiction with a deep sense of their being true.

C. S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia* might be one example. If we look for them in a library, we will find them under "fiction," or even "fantasy." Yet, anyone who has read them will testify to their deep and abiding truth.

The book of Job is surely true in this sense. Yet, its claim to truth goes beyond the truth claims of great literature. **Job — a must read for any suffering believer.** As we read, we must remember that its truth is also grounded in its inclusion in the canon of scripture. This means that the community of faith (both Jewish and Christian) has identified it as being one of the books which rings true as part of God's revelation. In other words, we can trust what it tells us about faith, even if it speaks to us by way of literary art.

The fact that this literature may have been the product of several authors and editors does not necessarily detract from its inspiration, either. The mere fact that more than one person may have contributed to a book does not make any of its parts less inspired. Indeed, such a recognition may actually enhance our appreciation of the lengths to which God has gone to give us the book in its final form.

During the next six chapters of this Resource Book we will have the opportunity to explore some of these issues more deeply. As we go, keep in mind that our goal goes beyond mere appreciation. Ultimately, the goal of any Bible study is to enhance faith. The book of Job has unparalleled potential for doing just that. It is a must read for any suffering believer who has ever looked toward heaven and wondered, "Why?"

Take Up and Read

When Augustine converted to Christianity in 386 CE he was sitting near a Bible in a garden. When he heard a voice telling him to "take up and read," he did as he was told. Neither Augustine nor Christianity has been the same since.

It is time for you to “take up and read” the whole book of Job. If you have read through the Basic Bible References for this session you already will have whetted your appetite. You will have the opportunity in subsequent sessions to luxuriate in the book, section by section. For now, however, try to get a sense of the book as a whole. Perhaps it would be best at this point to “take up and skim.” Try to read quickly through the whole book from start to finish, as you would a novel. This will help you get your bearings in the weeks to come.

As you read, keep the outline on the last pages of this Resource Book chapter in front of you. It will help you if you ever get to the point where you “can’t see the forest for the trees.” God bless you as you read. May you find it every bit as transforming as Augustine did!

For Reflection and Further Study

Memory Bank

1. Memorize Psalm 34:4–6, 15–18, or 12–22.
2. Memorize Ecclesiastes 8:14 or 9:11.

Reflection

1. Why do you want to study the book of Job? What do you hope to learn?
2. What was the most helpful sermon you've heard from this book? Why was it helpful?

Research

1. Read the introduction to the book of Job in a good study Bible, such as the Oxford Annotated Bible (NRSV).
2. Read the introduction to Job by Edwin M. Good in the *Harper's Bible Commentary*, ed. J. L. Mays (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), pages 407–409.

Outline for Job

I. Prose Prologue (1:1–2:13)

II. Poetic Dialogues (3:1–42:6)

A. Opening soliloquy (3)

B. Dialogues between Job and the Three Friends (4–27)

1) Cycle One (4–14)

Round A: Eliphaz (4–5)

Job (6–7)

Round B: Bildad (8)

Job (9–10)

Round C: Zophar (11)

Job (12–14)

2) Cycle Two (15–21)

Round A: Eliphaz (15)

Job (16–17)

Round B: Bildad (18)

Job (19)

Round C: Zophar (20)

Job (21)

3) Cycle Three (22–27)

Round A: Eliphaz (22)

Job (23–24)

Round B: Bildad (25)

Job (26–27)¹

C. Hymn to Wisdom (28)

D. Job’s summation and oaths (29–31)

E. Elihu’s interjection (32–37)

F. Dialogues between God and Job (38:1–42:6)

Round 1: God (38:1–40:2)

Job (40:3–5)

Round 2: God (40:6–41:34)

Job (42:1–6)

G. Prose Epilogue (42:7–17)

¹ The dialogue appears to break down here. Some scholars suggest that 27:7–23 contains the “lost” speech of Zophar.