



TRUSTING GOD

in the DARKNESS

A GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING

THE BOOK OF JOB

CHRISTOPHER ASH

“We find here the work of a wise veteran pastor, of one who knows life and who knows the Scriptures. Ash’s exposition is brief but meaty, profound but accessible, and clear without being simplistic. I can’t think of a better introduction to the book of Job, and Ash rightly reads Job in light of the entire Bible, in light of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Readers will be instructed, challenged, comforted, and wiser from reading this wonderful exposition.”

**Thomas R. Schreiner**, James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament Interpretation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Christopher Ash is an astute scholar of the book of Job and a seasoned minister of the gospel. Writing clearly and with great pastoral sensitivity, he leads us through one of the most difficult books of the Bible. Those struggling with Job and its theme of suffering will find much help here.”

**Eric Ortlund**, Lecturer in Old Testament and Biblical Hebrew, Oak Hill College, London

“If like me you have neglected Job, finding it too long and too confusing, knowing that it contains comfort but unsure about how to find it, help is at hand. Christopher Ash unfolds what is tightly packed, unravels what is knotted, and makes plain what is obscure. Immensely helpful and thoroughly enjoyable.”

**Alistair Begg**, Senior Pastor, Parkside Church, Chagrin Falls, Ohio

“The book of Job refuses superficial treatment of its deep agonies or easy answers to its hard questions. In this succinct study, Christopher Ash eschews both and instead draws us into the contours of this rich book with the keen mind of a scholar and the warm heart of a pastor. In a world full of suffering, we need Job. We need the pain-marked grappling; we need the faith-filled longing; and we need, ultimately, the Christ-centered hope. Ash helps us to find and feel these with tremendous skill and sensitivity, and we are indebted to him.”

**Jonathan Griffiths**, Lead Pastor, The Metropolitan Bible Church, Ottawa, Canada

“In a time weighed down by warring nations, a global pandemic, religious persecution, and broken relationships all around, *Trusting God in the Darkness* is more than a timely message. Christopher Ash is to be thanked for pulling our hearts back to the rich truths of Scripture in Job. I appreciate his pastoral reminder that our worship continues, even in the yawning gap between our expectations and experience. In my growing concern that the church has more welcome for Job’s friends than for Job, this book is a needed salve. Neither Job’s pain nor a good God should scandalize us anymore.”

**Andrew J. Schmutzer**, Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies,  
Moody Bible Institute; coauthor, *Between Pain and Grace*

“Think of Christopher Ash’s *Trusting God in the Darkness* as a handbook—a manual to take up in one hand—to be read at first straight through to begin grasping the crucial insights for daily life that the book of Job can convey to God’s people, and then to be read again one chapter at a time with a Bible in your other hand in order to learn what to look for in Job scene after scene. This book, like the book of Job itself, prompts us to lift our eyes from the world’s suffering and rest them on who God—the God of Jesus Christ—is. It is the finest short work on Job I have seen.”

**Mark R. Talbot**, Associate Professor of Philosophy, Wheaton College

*Trusting God in the Darkness*



# Trusting God in the Darkness

*A Guide to Understanding the Book of Job*

Christopher Ash

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*To the saints at All Saints, Little Shelford, England, 1997–2004,  
with thanks for all you taught me of the love of Jesus Christ.*





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## Preface

THIS BOOK IS NOT a treatment of a topic, whether the topic of suffering or of anything else. It is a study of the Bible book of Job. I want you to venture into the book of Job, to read, meditate, explore, and pray this profound Bible book into your bloodstream. If you have never done so, my prayer is that this short study will help you find a way in. If you have ventured in but got bogged down and confused, I hope this introduction will signpost the main roads.

Job is a neglected treasure of the Christian life. It has spawned an enormous outpouring of scholarly work, and yet few Christians know quite where to start in appropriating its message for themselves.

My own interest in Job was first stirred by Robert Fyall's excellent and provocatively titled book, *How Does God Treat His Friends?* (Christian Focus, 1995). I have also been helped by technical commentaries, notably those of John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Eerdmans, 1988), and Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job* (Westminster Press, 1985), and by Robert Fyall's scholarly study, *Now My Eyes Have Seen You* (Apollos, 2002). To Fyall in particular my debt is considerable, both in exegesis and in illustrative material.

This book began as a series of seven sermons preached in the evening services at All Saints, Little Shelford, while I was pastor there. After that, I taught Job for a number of years as part of the Cornhill Training Course in London, where there was time to go into much more detail, and in many other churches and conferences. I am grateful for these opportunities and to all who have given helpful comments and feedback.

It will be obvious that this short study is no substitute for a full commentary and makes no pretence at comprehensiveness. We shall focus only on the main roads through Job. The thoughtful reader will have all sorts of questions to follow up with deeper study. But if I can open a way in for some believers, I shall have fulfilled my purpose. Since publishing *Out of the Storm* in the United Kingdom in 2004, I have written a full-length commentary, *Job: The Wisdom of the Cross* (Crossway, 2014); readers in search of a fuller coverage may find it there. In the light of that comprehensive study, I have changed my mind about a few relatively minor points of interpretation; observant readers will notice that I have made some changes here to the original (2004) publication of *Out of the Storm*, to bring it into line with my later understanding as expressed in *Job: The Wisdom of the Cross*.

From time to time I have paraphrased Scripture, especially when trying to help us get the feel of some of the speeches. A Scripture reference next to words in speech marks doesn't necessarily mean it's a direct quotation; it may well be a paraphrase.

Christopher Ash  
Cambridge, England  
August 2020

# Outline and Structure of the Book of Job

## Part 1. Job and What Happened to Him

*Introducing Job* (1:1–5)

What happened to Job (1:6–2:10)

## Part 2. Job's Friends and Their "Conversations" with Job

*Introducing Job's three friends* (2:11–13)

Speeches by Job and his friends (3:1–27:23)

Job's first lament (3)

First cycle of speeches

Eliphaz (4–5)

Job (6–7)

Bildad (8)

Job (9–10)

Zophar (11)

Job (12–14)

Second cycle of speeches

Eliphaz (15)

Job (16–17)

Bildad (18)

Job (19)

OUTLINE AND STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK OF JOB

Zophar (20)

Job (21)

Third cycle of speeches (interrupted)

Eliphaz (22)

Job (23–24)

Bildad (25)

Job (26–27)

Poem about Wisdom (28:1–28)

Job's Final Defense (29:1–31:40)

Part 3: The Answers to Job

*Introducing Elihu* (32:1–5)

Elihu's answers (32:6–37:24)

The Lord's first answer and Job's response (38:1–40:5)

The Lord's second answer and Job's response (40:6–42:6)

Conclusion (42:7–17)

## Getting to Know the Book of Job

THIS BOOK BEGAN as a sermon series on the book of Job. Twelve days before the first sermon, on January 14, 2003, a police officer was stabbed and killed in Manchester, England. Why? This officer was an upright man, a faithful husband, and a loving father. What is more, he was a Christian and a committed member of his church, where he sometimes used to preach. The newspapers reported the moving statement by his father, whom I have since met, a former chairman of the United Kingdom Christian Police Association; he said through his tears that he was praying for the man who had killed his son. The media told of the quiet dignity of the officer's widow. They showed the happy family snapshots with his teenage son and daughters.

So why was *he* killed? Does this not make us angry? If we are going to be honest, we will admit that there were others who deserved to die more than he did. Perhaps there was a corrupt police officer somewhere who had unjustly put innocent people in prison, or a crooked police officer who had taken bribes. Or perhaps there was another police officer who was carrying on an affair with his



neighbor's wife. If one of those had been killed, we might have said that although we were sad, at least there would have appeared to be some moral logic to this death. But this was a family of, dare we say it, good people. Not sinless, of course, but believers living upright lives. So why was this pointless and terrible loss inflicted on *them*?

We need to be honest and face the kind of world we live in. Why does God allow these things? Why does he do nothing to put these things right? And why, on the other hand, do people who could not care less about God and justice thrive? Here in contemporary expression is the angry voice of an honest man from long ago, who also struggled with these same injustices:

Why do the wicked have it so good,  
     live to a ripe old age and get rich?  
 They get to see their children succeed,  
     get to watch and enjoy their grandchildren.  
 Their homes are peaceful and free from fear;  
     they never experience God's disciplining rod.  
 Their bulls breed with great vigor  
     and their cows calve without fail.  
 They send their children out to play  
     and watch them frolic like spring lambs.  
 They make music with fiddles and flutes,  
     have good times singing and dancing.  
 They have a long life on easy street,  
     and die painlessly in their sleep. (Job 21:7–13 MSG)

“Let's be honest,” Job effectively says. “Let's have no more of this pious make-believe that life goes well for good people and badly for bad people. You look around the world and see that it's simply not

true. By and large people who do not care about God live happier, longer lives with less suffering than do believers. Why? What kind of God runs a world like this?”

We face hard questions like this in the book of Job. But there are two ways to ask these questions. We may ask them as “armchair questions,” or we may ask them as “wheelchair questions.” We ask them as “armchair questions” if we ourselves are remote from suffering. As Shakespeare said, “He jests at scars that never felt a wound.”<sup>1</sup> The troubled Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote eloquently and almost bitterly:

O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall  
Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap  
May who ne'er hung there.<sup>2</sup>

We grapple with God with “wheelchair questions” when we do not hold this terror cheap, when we ourselves or those we love are suffering. Job asks the “wheelchair questions.”

Every pastor knows that behind most front doors lies pain, often hidden, sometimes long-drawn-out, sometimes very deep. I was discussing how to preach a passage from Job with four fellow ministers, when I paused to consider each of them. For a moment I lost my concentration on the text as I realized that one of them, some years before, had lost his wife in a car accident in their first year of marriage; the second was bringing up a seriously handicapped daughter. The third had broken his neck and come within two

1 William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.2.1.

2 Gerard Manley Hopkins, “No Worst,” in *Mortal Beauty, God’s Grace: Major Poems and Spiritual Writes of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, eds. John F. Thornton and Susan B. Varenne (New York, Random House, 2003), 45.

millimeters of total paralysis or death six years previously. And the fourth had undergone repeated radical surgery, which had changed his life. As my concentration returned to the text of Job, I thought, “This book is not merely academic: it is both about and for people who know suffering.”

Job is a fireball book. It is a staggeringly honest book. It is a book that knows what people actually say and think—and not just what they say publicly in church. It knows what people say behind closed doors and in whispers, and it knows what we say in our tears. It is not merely an academic book. If we listen to it with any care, it will touch, trouble, and unsettle us at a deep level.

Before we launch into the book, let me make two introductory points.

### **Job Is a Very Long Book**

Job is forty-two chapters long. We may consider that rather an obvious observation, but the point is this: in his wisdom God has given us a very long book. He has done so for a reason. It is easy to preach just the beginning and the end, and to skip rather quickly over the endless arguments in between as if it would not much matter if they were not there. But God has put them there.

Why? Perhaps it’s because when the suffering question and the “Where is God?” question and the “What kind of God?” question are asked from the wheelchair, they cannot be answered in a tweet. If we ask, “What kind of God allows this kind of world?” God gives us a forty-two-chapter book. Far from saying, “The message of Job can be summarized in a tweet and here it is,” he says, “Come with me on a journey, one that will take time. There is no instant answer.” Job cannot be distilled. It is a narrative with a slow pace (after the frenetic beginning) and long delays. Why? Because there

is no instantaneous working through grief, no quick fix to pain, no message of Job in a nutshell. God has given us a forty-two-chapter journey with no satisfactory bypass.

Indeed, if this short study is treated as an *alternative* to reading the text of Job, it will be like reading a guidebook to a foreign country as a substitute for actually visiting it, rather than as a preparation and accompaniment. This study is to help us read the book of Job itself, for we must read it, at length and at leisure.

This is just a short introductory study. I make no apology for that. When I was sent to Rome some years ago on business, I managed during one weekend to scrape together twenty-four hours to visit Florence. It seemed almost insulting to the riches of the Uffizi Gallery alone to give just one day to it. But it was better than nothing, and it gave me the desire to go back and explore further. If this book achieves that, it will have been worthwhile. My much fuller commentary, *Job: The Wisdom of the Cross* (Crossway, 2014) takes you through every verse of the book of Job. If you want to take your studies of Job further, this would be a help. But my longer work is also no substitute for the divinely inspired text of the book of Job itself.

### Most of Job Is Poetry

About 95 percent of the book of Job is poetry. Chapters 1 and 2 and part of chapter 42 are prose; almost all the rest is poetry. Poetry does not speak to us in the same way as prose. For poems, says J. I. Packer, “are always a personal ‘take’ on something, communicating not just from head to head but from heart to heart.”<sup>3</sup> A poem can

3 J. I. Packer, preface to Gaius Davies, *Genius, Grief, and Grace: A Doctor Looks at Suffering and Success* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2001), 8.

often touch, move, and unsettle us in ways that prose cannot. Job is a blend of the affective (touching our feelings) and the cognitive (addressing our minds). Poetry is particularly suited to this balanced address to the whole person. But poetry does not lend itself to summing up in tidy propositions, bullet points, neat systems, and well-swept answers. Poetry grapples with our emotions, wills, and sensitivities. We cannot just sum up a poem in a bald statement; we need to let a poem get to work on us, and immerse ourselves in it.

It is just so with Job. We shall be immersed in the poetry of Job. As we enter it, we must not expect tidy systematic points to note down and then think we've "done" Job, as a one-day tourist might "do" Florence. Job is to be lived in and not just studied. Let us read the book of Job itself, read it out loud, mull it over, absorb it, wonder, be unsettled, and meditate. And let God get to work on us through this great Bible book.

### **Questions for Reflection**

1. What "armchair" or "wheelchair" questions do you have about suffering?
2. How does personal experience of suffering change our questions?
3. Why might a slow process (and a long read) be necessary when processing these questions?

✦ *It's easy for us to trust God when life is going well.* ✦

But when suffering comes, trusting God's goodness, his attentiveness to what's going on in the world, and his justice becomes far more difficult. In times of intense suffering, many of us ask, *Why does God allow these things to happen?*

In the Bible, Job is known for facing intense personal suffering. Yet, upon closer examination, we find the book of Job is about more than just Job's calamities; it's a story about God and his relationship to Christ and his people in their suffering. In this helpful guide, Christopher Ash helps us explore the question, *Where is God in the midst of suffering?* As we read, meditate, and pray through the book of Job, we will find assurance that God will be with us in Christ through every season and trial.

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*Alistair Begg*

Senior Pastor, Parkside Church, Chagrin Falls, Ohio

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SUFFERING / BOOK OF JOB

