

## **BIBLE SURVEY - JOB**

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### **Foreword**

The setting of the book of Job makes it probably one of the earliest books in the Bible, certainly coming from around the time of the Patriarchs whose lives are recorded in the book of Genesis. This fact coupled with the overall theme of the book, the subject of suffering, shows us this is a problem godly people have battled with since the earliest times. Because of that it is particularly relevant for believers today who face suffering of all kinds and find it a perplexing experience to have to endure.

The book also exposes an error that even some of the godliest of people have fallen into. Many, knowing that God does punish sin, have jumped to the wrong conclusion that therefore if anyone is suffering it must be because they have committed some sin. Very often they are quick to share their conclusions with those who are suffering and as a result only increase the distress they are already experiencing, and that is cruel to say the least. Now we

need to be careful because there are times when God does punish sin in this life, and Hebrews 12 teaches us the Lord will discipline his children at times, but the mistake is made when we say that God is punishing people every time they go through suffering. That is not true. Job's friends took this approach and were rebuked for their wrong conclusion. In fact Job suffered for the very opposite reason, namely, because he was such a godly man. Satan marked him out as a special target of his animosity because of his devotion to the Lord.

We also need to note that Job was never told why he suffered. We are, but he was not and there will be times in our own lives when we may not be told why the Lord brings us through a particular time of suffering and trial. At such times we need to learn from Job who said about God in Job 13:15 *“Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him...”* May God grant us the grace to trust him and to walk by faith and not by sight.

Again I am indebted to Philip Parsons for his work which has resulted in this book and the Serving Today radio programmes which it accompanied.

Derek French  
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The book of Job begins a new section of the Bible. Up until this point the Scriptures have consisted of the law and

history of ancient Israel. Job is the first book in the section that is sometimes referred to as the 'wisdom literature'.

### 1. Author and Date of Writing

Although some think otherwise, the most natural view of this book is that it is both factual and historical and therefore not a parable. Having said that, we do not know exactly who Job was or who wrote the book. The time of writing would seem to coincide with the patriarchal age, before Israel had emerged as a nation. If this is the case, then Job is the earliest completed book of the Bible.

### 2. Preface

The first two chapters of the book are a kind of preface to set the scene for the discourses that follow. In this section we are introduced to wealthy but righteous Job, how he is viewed in the sight of God, and the desire of Satan to tarnish God's name by bringing this man down. Within defined limits, Satan is permitted to do his worst and Job ends up having lost all his children, his possessions and his health. This introduction gives us an extraordinary glimpse of God's universal rule from heaven and includes the role of Satan, the accuser, as one who is subservient to God.

### 3. Theme

The main theme of the book is really in the form of a question, *'Why does a just God afflict his God-fearing and righteous servant with such severity?'*

In a sense we were given a clue to the answer by listening in to the proceedings of the Heavenly court (chapters 1-2); but Job and his friends did not have this knowledge - certainly not at the time. So in the light of Job's terrible sufferings they begin to debate what might be the possible answer to this question.

### 4. Job's Three Friends

To those who have a superficial knowledge of the book, these three - Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar - are the 'baddies'. The term 'Job's comforters' has come to be used in a purely negative connection, but I would like to say a few words on their behalf.

- i. They actually came and sat with him. They were in one sense joining in his sufferings, because even the silent support of such people is better than complete loneliness, and in their case was better than their words.
- ii. They, like Job, were God-fearers. Their understanding of his sufferings may have been astray, but much of their theology is orthodox. Indeed, when godly persons today are called upon to suffer to a seemingly unprecedented

degree, there are many Christians who are prepared to speak negatively and accusingly, very much as Job's friends did. In writing them off we may be passing judgement upon ourselves!

## 5. Brief Analysis

Following the historical narrative of chapters 1 and 2, in chapter 3 Job begins to speak to his friends and curses the day of his birth, wishing that he had never been born. But he does not renounce God in any way.

From chapters 4 to 31 there follows three cycles of discussions between each of his friends in turn, with his reply to each of them. A significant variation to this pattern is that Zophar has nothing further to say in the third round.

From chapters 32 to 37 we have the speeches of Elihu, a younger man, who has now joined in the discussion. He is nearer to the truth but does not give Job a satisfactory answer as to why he is suffering as he is.

So we see that men have addressed the problem. The solutions they have offered do not resolve the issue. Job still remains unsatisfied, although he does make that dramatic affirmation in chapter 19:25-27,

*“I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will*

*see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!”*

It remains then for God to speak and to reveal himself to Job. This occurs in those magnificent descriptions of the power of God and his complete control over all his works (chapters 38 to 42) - including, by implication, his suffering servant Job. Job's final response is what is true of every child of God when confronted with the majesty and greatness and glory of God (chapter 42:2-6).

The problem facing all of these God-fearing men was the very intensity of what had happened to Job. Remember that he had lost all his considerable possessions, and his ten grown-up children had been swept away in a hurricane while they were having a party. And then to cap it all his health had been taken away - not just a sniffle or feeling below par, but his whole body covered with painful sores, rather like having shingles all over your body. Some have committed suicide as a result of such an affliction.

## 6. A Simplistic Answer

In attempting to answer the question as to why Job was going through such awful suffering, his three friends failed because they adopted a simplistic approach. There was nothing wrong with their starting point, but the conclusions they reached were wide of the mark. Their line of reasoning was as follows:

- (a) God is a holy and just God.
- (b) Every sin must be given its due punishment.
- (c) God punishes sin in this life.
- (d) Great suffering must be the result of great sin or show the need for unusual chastisement.

The first two assumptions are perfectly correct: God is holy and just and every sin must receive its just punishment. God also does sometimes punish sin in this life and chastises his people to further refine them. What is clearly also true from a study of this book and the rest of Scripture is that by no means all sin is punished in this life. Sometimes great sins and great sinners seem often to go unpunished. We have to learn that in bringing great trials upon his people God sometimes has other motives than even their correction.

As Job was at pains to point out, the obvious sins of the godless may often go largely unpunished in this life. Since God is just, this is ample proof that there will be a judgement and punishment to be received in the life to come. One of the reasons why Job's friends went astray in their deductions was because they knew even less than we do of the life to come.

Job also again and again refuses to accept the idea that the intensity of his suffering is due to the greatness of his sin or his need of unusual chastening. Again and again he shows that he has behaved in a righteous manner in keeping the commandments of God, not just some of them but

essentially all of them. His friends cannot prove his sin by citing specific acts, but say that he must have sinned greatly, simply because they are applying this false logic.

We are all rather prone to make the kind of judgements that Job's friends made. It stems from the strong sense of justice which all human beings have, but fails to take into consideration all the evidence. When calamity in any form comes upon others or us, we need to be careful in assessing the reasons, so that we do not fall into the same trap as Job's friends and settle for too simplistic an answer.

## 7. Job's Dilemma

His friends have not given a satisfactory answer to Job's great suffering. He still clings on to the goodness of God, while at the same time appealing to a good conscience in the matter of sin. He does not understand what God is doing to him, but his trust in the character of God cannot be shaken. *“Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him.”* After three rounds of fruitless discussions, Job finally rebukes his friends and in his grief turns to God as his vindicator.

There are two lessons that can be drawn out from what we have looked at so far:

- (i) We should be slow to speak when great affliction comes upon a godly person, indeed upon any person.

(ii) We will not be given the answers, in this life, to all our problems and trials.

### **8. Elihu's Speech, chapters 32-37.**

Elihu, a name which means 'God is Jehovah', now joins the debate. He is a much younger man who up till now has deferred to his elders, but he reminds them that old age does not necessarily bring wisdom with it. He is angry because Job's friends have not been able to answer the problem of Job's suffering, but he is also angry with Job, because he feels that Job, in his insistence upon his righteousness is in great danger of spiritual pride. Elihu does not attempt to find a reason for Job's suffering as his friends did, but he does find fault with Job's arguments. His view is that Job had come perilously close to charging God with unrighteousness. With all the fervour that he can muster, Elihu emphasizes the truth of God's faultless justice and righteousness. He also answers, with equal fervour, a clear flaw in Job's argument - his questioning the value of being righteous. He warns Job of the great danger of even thinking in that way and exhorts him to wait for God's answer even though it appears slow to come (chapter 35:14).

Elihu then concludes his speech by showing the goodness of God towards men and also His greatness as demonstrated in the realm of the weather: the formation of the clouds and rain, the thunderstorm, the snow and ice, all of which man has no power to control; they are under the sovereign power

of God. At the end of his speech there is perhaps a hint of the approaching storm, in which God answers Job.

### **9. God's Answer to Job, chapters 38-41.**

In these chapters, the Lord reveals his greatness and sovereignty over all his creation. After a mild rebuke, the Lord unfolds his greatness in the foundation of the earth itself, in controlling the mighty power of the ocean, commanding the very dawn, ordering the constellations in the heavens and commanding all the elements to ensure that the living creatures which have their abode in the wildest of places are all provided for. In response to this first speech Job begins to see that he was rash in his claims and now lays his hand upon his mouth. The Lord continues his reply by a reference to two great creatures called 'Behemoth' and 'Leviathan'. Almost all modern commentators translate these as the Hippopotamus and the Crocodile. Much of the description just does not fit, so a much better interpretation would be of two powerful members of the dinosaur family. The argument is that if man cannot comprehend and control these mighty creatures which were created by God, Job should not be surprised that he cannot fully understand all of God's works of providence, either.

Job's response is repentance and worship. Repentance for hasty and rash speech about God; worship because he now has a fuller revelation of the character of God. And it is interesting to note that no reason is given for the extremity

of Job's suffering. The real answer to the problem is that when the believer is going through a severe trial which is clearly not because of wilful sins, he must learn patience and seek to trust in the almighty Wisdom which has permitted such a trial. The answer may not be given in this life, but God always knows what he is doing.

## 10. Job's Final End

The last verses of the book revert to prose and tell us the final state of affairs. Job's health and wealth are fully restored, indeed his possessions are doubled. As for Job's friends, they are commanded to bring sacrifices and then God will hear Job's prayer for them.

In the light of New Testament teaching we cannot expect the kind of material result as Job had, but we should look to the heavenly reward for our patience under affliction. (2 Corinthians 4:17, 18 and 12:7-10).

## 11. Sermon Topics

The following are a list of suggested headings for sermons but will need further study to make them into complete messages. You may well find that each of the main headings contains material for more than one sermon. Because Job is such a large book it is well worth doing more of a survey of the book taking large sections of the text in our sermons, instead of working through it verse by

verse, at least initially. This will help our hearers to gain the overall themes.

## 1. Historical introduction (chapters 1-2)

- (a) Job's righteousness and prosperity.
- (b) Satan's malice towards Job.
- (c) Satan asks to afflict Job.
- (d) Satan takes away Job's prosperity, family and health.
- (e) Job responds in worship.
- (f) The devil is powerful but only allowed to do what God permits.
- (g) The believer is not guaranteed health and wealth; Job was godly and suffered because he was godly.

## Job's comforters

- (a) They were God-fearing men.
- (b) They came and sat with him showing their sympathy with their friend.
- (c) They were partly right in their assessment.
- (d) They wrongly accuse Job of great sin for which they had no evidence whatsoever.
- (e) This is an easy trap for Christians today to fall into and must be avoided, because such false accusations only increase the suffering and anguish of those in distress.

## 2. An over-simplistic answer from Job's friends

- (a) God is holy and just – a thoroughly correct and biblical statement.
- (b) Every sin must be punished – again a thoroughly correct and biblical statement.
- (c) God punishes sin in this life – this is only partly true and does not occur in every case. Not all sin is punished in this life.
- (d) Great suffering must be the result of great sin – this is an incorrect deduction to make. (See also John 9:1-3.)
- (e) The fact that some sin remains unpunished shows a day of judgement is therefore guaranteed.
- (f) Great suffering, particularly of the believer, is not always because of sin and in Job's case such a deduction was completely wrong.

## 3. Job unsatisfied after all the discussions

- (a) Job's friends have given him an unsatisfactory answer.
- (b) Job clings to the goodness of God and he does not let go of this all through the book.
- (c) Job claims to have a good conscience towards God.
- (d) Job is left asking, Why then such unexplained suffering? His friends had not answered this, and Job was never told why he had suffered even though we are. Sometimes God does not tell us why certain things happen to us. We have to walk by faith and not by sight at such times.

## 4. Elihu's response

- (a) Speaks last because of his youth, showing a right respect for his elder brethren.
- (b) Rebukes Job's friends as they had not dealt with the issue as they should have done.
- (c) Rebukes Job for spiritual pride – he felt Job was going too far in justifying himself.
- (d) Emphasizes God's perfection, something we cannot always discern when we are going through trials but which is still true.
- (e) Being righteous is of great value; Job had almost doubted it.
- (f) Urges Job to be patient and wait for God's answer - patience is one of the lessons being taught in this whole episode.
- (g) God's control of the weather is part of his sovereignty and providence and therefore we must never question what God is doing with us.

## 5. God's answer to Job; his sovereignty in creation and providence

God is simply demonstrating to Job that he is in control of all things and has the right to do as he pleases. His sovereignty is vast. This is demonstrated in the following areas.

- (a) The very foundations of the earth
- (b) The power of the ocean

- (c) The commanding of the dawn
- (d) Ordering the constellations
- (e) Controlling the weather
- (f) Providing for the creatures which live in remotest places
- (g) The greatness of Behemoth and Leviathan (Dinosaurs not then extinct)

## 6. Two important questions

- (a) Can we fathom God's power? The answer to this of course is 'no', we cannot fully comprehend God's omnipotence.
- (b) Can we fathom God's providence? The answer again is 'no'. We can only glimpse a small part of his providence at times but even that is beyond our comprehension.

The conclusion really is that we must trust God when we cannot see or understand everything.

## 7. Job's response to God and final state

- (a) Job lays his hand upon his mouth - he says, I've spoken rashly, I've said things I shouldn't have said and I'm not going to say any more.  
One preacher said that one mark of a conversion is when a man stops talking. Before he was saved he was full of himself but when he is converted he begins to see that he is not quite as important as he thought he was.

- (b) Job humbles himself and repents before God even though he was not guilty of gross sin or anything great like he had been accused of by his friends.
- (c) Job worships God
- (d) Job intercedes for his friends, acting in a priestly role as seen earlier in the book when he offered sacrifices and prayed for his children.
- (e) Job's prosperity was restored. We need to remember that although material prosperity was much more to the fore in Old Testament times, it is not something that is emphasised in New Testament times at all, because we have the eternal perspective we should be considering.

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