

# The Book of Job

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In the arena of biblical studies, there are five books that are generally included under the heading of “wisdom literature” or “the poetic books of the Old Testament.” They are the books of Proverbs, Psalms, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, and Job. Of these five books, one stands out in bold relief, manifesting significant differences from the other four. That is the book of Job. The wisdom that is found in the book of Job is not communicated in the form of proverb. Rather, the book of Job deals with questions of wisdom in the context of a narrative dealing with Job’s profound anguish and excruciating pain. The setting for this narrative is in patriarchal times. Questions have arisen as to the authorial intent of this book, whether it was meant to be historical narrative of a real individual or whether its basic structure is that of a drama with a prologue, including an opening scene in heaven, involving discourse between God and Satan, and moving climactically to the epilogue, in which the profound losses of Job during his trials are replenished.

In any case, at the heart of the message of the book of Job is the wisdom with respect to answering the question as to how God is involved in the problem of human suffering. In every generation protests arise saying that if God is good, then there should be no pain, no suffering or death in this world. Along with this protest against bad things happening to good people, have also been attempts to create a calculus of pain, by which it is assumed that an individual’s threshold of suffering is in direct proportion to the degree of their guilt or the sin they have committed. A quick response to this is found in the ninth chapter of John, where Jesus responds to the disciples’ question regarding the source of the suffering of the man born blind.

In the book of Job, the character is described as a righteous man, indeed the most righteous man to be found on the earth, but one whom Satan claims is righteous only to receive blessings from the hand of God. God has put a hedge around him and has blessed him beyond all mortals, and as a result the Devil accuses Job of serving God only because of the generous payoff he receives from his Maker. The challenge comes from the evil one for God to remove the hedge of protection and see whether Job will then begin to curse God. As the story unfolds, Job’s suffering goes in rapid progression from bad to worse. His suffering is so intense that he finds himself sitting on a dung heap, cursing the day he was born, and crying out in relentless pain. His suffering is so great that even his wife counsels him to curse God, that he might die and be relieved of his agony. What unfolds further in the story is the counsel given to Job from Job’s friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. Their testimony shows how hollow and shallow is their loyalty to Job, and how presumptive they are in assuming that Job’s untold misery must be grounded in a radical degeneracy in Job’s character. Job’s counsel reaches a higher level with some deep insights by Elihu. Elihu gives several speeches that carry with them many elements of biblical wisdom, but the final wisdom to be found in this

great book comes not from Job's friends or from Elihu, but from God Himself. When Job demands an answer from God, God responds with this rebuke, "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" (Job 38:1-3). What ensues from this rebuke is the most intense interrogation of a human ever brought to bear by the Creator. It almost seems at first glance as if God is bullying Job, in as much as He says, "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?" (v. 4). God raises question after question in this manner. "Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades? Or loose the belt of Orion? Can you lead forth the Mazzaroth in their season, or can you guide the Bear with its children?" (vv. 31-32). Obviously, the answers to these rhetorical questions that come in machine gun rapidity is always, "No, no, no." God hammers away at the inferiority and subordination of Job in His interrogation. God continues with question after question about Job's ability to do things that Job cannot do but that God clearly can do.

In chapter 40, God says to Job finally, "Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? He who argues with God, let him answer it" (v. 2). Now, Job's response is not one of defiant demand for answers to his misery. Rather he says, "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" (vv. 4-5). And again God picks up the interrogation and goes even more deeply in the rapid fire interrogation that shows the overwhelming contrast between the power of God, who is known in Job as El Shaddai, and the contrasting impotence of Job. Finally, Job confesses that such things were too wonderful. He says, "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" (42:5-6).

What is noteworthy in this drama, is that God never directly answers Job's questions. He doesn't say, "Job, the reason you have suffered is for this or for that." Rather, what God does in the mystery of the iniquity of such profound suffering, is that He answers Job with Himself. This is the wisdom that answers the question of suffering — not the answer to why I have to suffer in a particular way, in a particular time, and in a particular circumstance, but wherein does my hope rest in the midst of suffering.

The answer to that comes clearly from the wisdom of the book of Job that agrees with the other premises of the wisdom literature: the fear of the Lord, awe and reverence before God, is the beginning of wisdom. And when we are befuddled and confused by things that we cannot understand in this world, we look not for specific answers always to specific questions, but we look to know God in His holiness, in His righteousness, in His justice, and in His mercy. Therein is the wisdom that is found in the book of Job.