1 Introducing the drama of Job (Job 1–2)

If God is the heavenly sovereign in charge of life on earth, why is there so much injustice? Why do bad people get away with evil? And why do good people suffer?

What is the meaning of suffering? Is God trying to teach us a lesson? Does it mean we've got off track somewhere? Do we suffer for no reason sometimes? Where is God when everything goes wrong?



The Book of Job presents us with two truths that seem incompatible: a) God is just, and b) Job is suffering in ways that make no sense, that feel unjust. Job's friends all tell him that the problem cannot be with God so it must be with him. Job refuses to roll over and play guilty. He wants to know why God is picking on him.

What do you do when tough experiences challenge your faith?
What do you say to the suffering person?

Before we open the Book of Job and listen to his experiences, can you relate to these questions? Have you experienced suffering that didn't make sense? Relational breakdown? Health issues? Financial pain? Have you been abused or had people taking advantage of you? If you're comfortable to share it, what's is your experience?

.....

.....

The questions raised in this ancient Hebrew book of wisdom are as relevant today as the day they were penned.

1.1 What's in the Book of Job?

Dramatic monologues are the core of the Book, as Job and his conversation partners try to find meaning in Job's suffering (Job 3–42). Before their discussions begins, a narrator introduces us to Job and gives us the background to understand his pain (Job 1–2). At the end of the book, the narrator returns to wrap it up (Job 42:7-17).

In the monologues, Job speaks, and his friends respond. That cycle is repeated three times (Job 3–31). Then a new player (Elihu) makes three further attempts to answer Job's questions (Job 32–37). Ultimately, the LORD explains that Job has no way to comprehend what God is doing (Job 38–42). Job does not receive an answer as to why he was suffering. God's presence is what satisfied him.

To see how the story fits together, check out this 11-minute video from Tim Mackie and the team at The Bible Project: https://bibleproject.com/videos/job/

Here's an **outline** of the Book of Job:

Lifting the curtain: the narrator sets the scene (chapters 1–2)

First cycle of speeches (chapters 3–11):

Job (chapter 3) and Eliphaz (chapters 4–5)
Job (chapters 6–7) and Bildad (chapter 8)
Job (chapters 9–10) and Zophar (chapter 11)

Second cycle of speeches (chapters 12–20)

Job (chapters 12–14) and Eliphaz (chapter 15)
Job (chapters 16–17) and Bildad (chapter 18)
Job (chapters 19) and Zophar (chapter 20)

Third cycle of speeches (chapters 21–31)

Job (chapter 21) and Eliphaz (chapter 22)
Job (chapters 23–24) and Bildad (chapter 25)
Job (chapter 26), Job (chapters 27–28) and Job again (chapters 29–31)

Elihu's speeches (chapters 32–37)

Elihu (chapters 32–33)
Elihu (chapter 34)
Elihu again (chapters 35–37)

The LORD and Job (chapters 38–42)

The LORD (chapters 38–40:2) and Job (chapter 40:3-5)
The LORD (chapters 40:6–41) and Job (chapter 42:1-6)

Closing the curtain: the narrator wraps it up (chapter 42:7-17)

Tonight we cover the introductory chapters where the narrator provides the background for the dramatic poetic speeches of the main drama. Over the next three weeks, we'll hear three cycles of speeches where Job and friends try to make sense of his sufferings. In our fifth week we'll listen to Elihu's views, and hear how the LORD responds to Job. In our final week, we'll consider how the Messiah's sufferings provide fresh insight into how divine justice operates.

Our schedule:

Week	Topic	Chapters
1	Introducing the drama of Job	Job 1–2
2	First round of speeches	Job 3–11
3	Second round of speeches	Job 12–20
4	Third round of speeches	Job 21–31
5	Elihu, and the LORD	Job 32–41
6	Restorative justice	Job 42

1.2 Who was Job? (1:1-5)

The book opens with the narrator introducing us to the main character:

> **Job 1:1-3 (NIV)**
> 1 In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man
> was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil. 2 He had
> seven sons and three daughters, 3 and he owned seven thousand sheep,
> three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred
> donkeys, and had a large number of servants. He was the greatest man
> among all the people of the East.

Hold on, narrator, you haven't told us what we expect to hear in a Hebrew story!

Who was Job? What tribe is he from? Who was his father? Is he not even Jewish?
Where was Job? *The land of Uz* is an "uncertain location."[1] Somewhere to the *east*?
When was Job? Is this before Abraham, or after the exile? Why no background?

No family. An uncertain location. No historical setting. This is not how the Hebrews wrote about historical people. For example:

- In the Torah, **Abraham** is introduced through his ancestors, positioning him precisely within his family (11:10-32).
- In the Prophets, **Isaiah** is introduced as the son of Amoz, in a geographical setting (Judah and Jerusalem) and a historical period (Isaiah 1:1).
  Likewise, **Jeremiah** is introduced by his father (Hilkiah) and tribe (Levi), in a geographical setting, and a historical period (Jeremiah 1:1-3).
- In the Writings, even a short book like **Ruth** begins by identifying Naomi's deceased husband, their tribe, where they came from, and where they went (Ruth 1:1-5), closing with the historical connection to King David (4:18-22).

By contrast, Job as no ancestors. He's godly, but not Jewish. He's *the greatest man among all the people of the East*—like, the greatest person you never heard of.

Job is not introduced to us as a historical person. He's a character in a play, a drama where the characters wrestle with the problem of undeserved suffering. This is not history (like the preceding books). This is **wisdom literature**.

The Bible refers to literary figures as well as literal people. We've *heard of the patience of Job*, James says (5:11). Not even a blameless and upright person like Job could save Jerusalem from Babylon's invasion, says Ezekiel (14:13, 20). Figures from other literature appear in the Bible too, such as when Job speaks of God *cutting Rahab to pieces* (25:12). In the legends of Ugarit and Mesopotamia, Rahab was the chaos monster from the sea whose role was to overwhelm the world with disorder. [2]

---

[1] David J. A. Clines, *Job 1–20*, Word Biblical Commentary (Word, Inc., 1989), 9.
"Uz" could refer to several places, including Edom (Lamentations 4:21).

[2] The United Bible Societies suggests translating Job 26:12b as "because he is intelligent he destroyed the sea animal called Rahab" or "he is wise, and because of this he was able to kill the sea monster Rahab." — William David Reyburn, *A Handbook on the Book of Job* (United Bible Societies, 1992), 478.

Hebrew wisdom literature called God's people to live by the wisdom of the Torah. Examples:

- A healthy fear of their heavenly sovereign is foundational for knowing what's good. Not respecting the LORD'S instruction is folly (**Proverbs 1:7**).
- The Torah of YHWH anchors and sustains the wise person, while the wicked are as dry and unstable as tumbleweeds (**Psalm 1**).

The Torah promised blessing for those who obeyed, and cursing for those who did not (Deuteronomy 28). The wisdom literature applies those promises to daily life, e.g.:

> **Proverbs 3:33** *The LORD's curse is on the house of the wicked,*
> *but he blesses the home of the righteous.*
>
> **Proverbs 28:14** *Blessed is the one who always trembles before God,*
> *but whoever hardens their heart falls into trouble.*

At a general level, this principle of retribution seems to hold true. You reap what you sow, whether that's good seed, rubbish seed, or no seed. Cheat on your friends and you undermine your friendships.

But at the individual level, retribution is less certain. Sometimes the righteous suffer (Psalm 42:10). Sometimes the wicked prosper (Psalm 73:3). Hebrew wisdom literature recognizes unjust suffering as part of what's wrong with life under the sun:

> **Ecclesiastes 4:1-3 (NIV)**
>
> 1 Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under
> the sun: I saw the tears of the oppressed— and they have no comforter;
> power was on the side of their oppressors— and they have no comforter.
>
> 2 And I declared that the dead, who had already died, are happier than
> the living, who are still alive. 3 But better than both is the one who has
> never been born, who has not seen the evil that is done under the sun.

What is God up to in a world of such tragedy and pain? An author from our own time calls this *the question that never goes away*.[3]

Since Job was not Jewish, you might wonder whether others in the ancient world also wrote about the injustice of life. Indeed, they did. Many of their writings have survived. Examples:[4]

a) *Man and His God*: A young man remains faithful to his god even though he became sick for no obvious reason. (Sumerian, early second millennium BC.)
b) *The Sufferer's Salvation*: A Job-like figure keeps praising Marduk even though his friends accuse him of wrong-doing (Akkadian, 14th century BC.).

[3] Philip Yancey, *The Question that Never Goes Away: What is God up to in a world of such tragedy and pain?* (Hodder & Stoughton,2013).

[4] J. E. Hartley, "Job 2: Ancient Near Eastern Background," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings*, (Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), 346–361.

c) *Dialogue Between a Man and his God*: A man concludes he must have done wrong because of the suffering he's experiencing. (Akkadian, 17th century BC.)
d) *The Babylonian Theodicy*: A sufferer and his friend explore whether unjust suffering undermines justice and honour in society. (Around 1000 BC.)
e) *The Admonitions of Ipuwer*. Explores the social instability that occurs when people don't get what they deserve. (Egyptian.)
f) *A Dispute over Suicide*. Egyptian text discussing whether death is an option.
g) *The Complaints of Khakheperrē-sonb*. An Egyptian lament says, "Right is cast outside. Wrong is in the council hall. The plans of the gods are violated. Their ordinances neglected. The land is in turmoil. Mourning is in everyplace."

People across the Ancient Near East expected the gods to give people what they deserved. And they all observed that this is not how life always works.

Remember, Job is non-Jewish. This book was not challenging whether the LORD was doing right in his implementation of the Sinai covenant. It's a broader question about how God is running the world when our experience is that life is not always fair.

While Job was not Jewish, he was religious:

> **Job 1:4-5 (NIV)**
>
> 4 His sons used to hold feasts in their homes on their birthdays, and they would invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. 5 When a period of feasting had run its course, Job would make arrangements for them to be purified. Early in the morning he would sacrifice a burnt offering for each of them, thinking, "Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts." This was Job's regular custom.

Some commentators situate Job in the time of Genesis when Abraham offered his own sacrifices. In later centuries, only priests were permitted to offer sacrifices, and only at the temple. The problem with that assumption is that Job wasn't Jewish.

Trying to keep the gods happy is how people in most places treat religion. In some countries today, you still see people setting out offerings so the gods will bless them and not be angry with them. Job was fearful that God may take away his wealth if his family offended God. That's what he says in 3:25. Religion is often based on fear.

Because Job is not Jewish, this book is relevant for suffering people in all cultures, all eras, and all religions. People expect the gods to give them what they deserve. This **retribution principle** is foundational to most faiths. Hinduism says if you don't receive what you deserve in this life, you'll get it in the next one (reincarnation). Buddhism helps the sufferer to disassociate from the pain of the world by finding solace through meditation (enlightenment). Christianity teaches the way of the cross: Jesus embraced the suffering to bear away the sin of the world, and calls us to follow him by taking up our crosses also. We'll talk more about that in our final week.

The brilliance of the Book of Job is that it wrestles with theodicy (whether God is just) without ever sinking to mere armchair theology. The suffering person is right there in your face, every moment, in every conversation. Job's presence forces us to care about how our beliefs affect the suffering person.

1.3 What happened to Job? (1:6-12)

The narrator gives us some background information that Job himself does not know. Job's sufferings are part of something more than what happens on earth. A council that meets in the heavenly realm makes decisions that affect life on earth.[5]

> **Job 1:6-7 (ESV)**
>
> 6 Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present
> themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them.
> 7 The LORD said to Satan, "From where have you come?"
> Satan answered the LORD and said, "From going to and fro on the earth,
> and from walking up and down on it."

Remember Job is not Jewish, though the author of the story is. The people of the ancient world believed that each nation had its own god(s), and these gods met in a *great assembly* from time to time to sort of the affairs of the earth. The chief god chaired the assembly. The lesser gods were sometimes called *the sons of the gods*.

The great assembly was essentially a cosmic parliament. In Hebrew thought, the LORD is in charge of all nations: *The LORD is the great king above all gods* (Psalm 95:3). *God presides over the great assembly; he renders judgement among the "gods"* (Psalm 82:1). The LORD chairs the great assembly when the sons of God (the other spiritual beings) present themselves before the heavenly throne to account for what they've been doing.

In this group is a figure called *ha śaṭan*. *Ha* means "the," and *śaṭan* means "adversary," so the Hebrew phrase translates to "the adversary." In later times (second century BC), *śaṭan* became a proper name for the spiritual power that opposed God's people: Satan. But Hebrew did not use "the" with a proper noun. They did not say "the David" or "the Job," so it's very unlikely that they would say "the Satan." *Ha śaṭan* should be translated "the adversary" or "the opponent."

In the framework of the heavenly council, the adversary was something like the opposition in our parliamentary system today.[6] The role is to present a contrary point of view. Since the royal court also served as a court of justice, the role of *ha-satan* was something like a prosecutor, the one who brings the case against God's people.

[5] I'm using the English Standard Version here because it's closer to the Hebrew than the NIV.

[6] John Goldingay, *Job for Everyone*, Old Testament for Everyone (SPCK, 2013), 12.

For example, in Zechariah 3:1, *ha-satan* was prosecuting the case that the Jews were unfit to be God's people after the exile, since the person who should have been maintaining the covenant relationship was himself dressed in filthy rags (since no cleansing rituals had been performed since the temple fell 70 years earlier). *Ha-satan* is "the accuser" (as in Revelation 12:10).

So here, in the heavenly court, when the LORD comments on the faithfulness of Job, the accuser responds with an accusation:

> **Job 1:8-12 (ESV)**
>
> 8 And the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job,
> that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man,
> who fears God and turns away from evil?" 9 Then Satan answered the
> LORD and said, "Does Job fear God for no reason? 10 Have you not put a
> hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You
> have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased
> in the land. 11 But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he
> will curse you to your face." 12 And the LORD said to Satan, "Behold, all
> that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your
> hand." So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD.

The accusation is that Job only serves God for the benefits he receives. God has blessed Job for his obedience, but what if Job was suffering? Would he still serve God? Or would he turn away from God if the benefits dried up?

"Okay, let's find out," the heavenly court says. The adversary receives permission to strip Job of all his benefits, but not to harm him.

Bible commentator Gerald Wilson puts it like this:

> The fact that God affirms Job's righteousness directly to *the* Satan, *the Accuser*, the very one responsible for testing the validity of human protestations of faith, has the effect of issuing a challenge that almost cannot go unaccepted. What is an Accuser expected to do, but to *accuse* and propose the most strenuous test of faith possible. That is exactly what *the* Satan does.
>
> **1:9** / *The satan* responds to God's strong affirmation of Job's outstanding character by proposing a test of Job's apparently impeccable faith. Job's piety is suspect, says *the* Satan, because God has always given him protection and abundant blessing. Job does not fear God **for nothing** but because he "gets the goods."[7]

[7] Gerald H. Wilson, *Job*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Baker Books, 2012), 23.

1.4 Job's tragic day (1:13-22)

In the drama, Job loses everything of value in a single day:

> **Job 1:13-19 (NIV)**
>
> 13 One day when Job's sons and daughters were feasting and drinking
> wine at the oldest brother's house, 14 a messenger came to Job and said,
> "The **oxen** were ploughing and the **donkeys** were grazing nearby, 15 and
> the Sabeans attacked and made off with them. They put the servants to
> the sword, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!"
>
> 16 While he was still speaking, another messenger came and said,
> "The fire of God fell from the heavens and burned up **the sheep** and the
> servants, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!"
>
> 17 While he was still speaking, another messenger came and said, "The
> Chaldeans formed three raiding parties and swept down on your **camels**
> and made off with them. They put the servants to the sword, and I am
> the only one who has escaped to tell you!"
>
> 18 While he was still speaking, yet another messenger came and said,
> "Your **sons and daughters** were feasting and drinking wine at the
> oldest brother's house, 19 when suddenly a mighty wind swept in from
> the desert and struck the four corners of the house. It collapsed on them
> and they are dead, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!"

Everything Job has worked for is taken from him: his assets and his offspring. He is no longer *the greatest man among all the people of the East* (verse 5). He was reduced to being a no one with nothing. How does he respond?

> **Job 1:20-22 (NIV)**
>
> 20 At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head.
> Then he fell to the ground in worship 21 and said:
>
> "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart.
> The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away;
> may the name of the LORD be praised."
>
> 22 In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.

Remember, Job himself does not know about the meeting of the heavenly court and the test he is enduring. For him, there is no logic in what just happened. His booming business was taken from him for no reason.

Something in our hearts reacts when life isn't fair. We expect those who do good to be rewarded and those who do wrong to suffer. But this retribution principle raises the question of whether people do good only for the benefits. John Walton says:

> The Challenger's question, "Does Job fear God for nothing?" (1:9)
> centres on Job's motivation for serving God and suggests that God's
> treatment of the righteous is the incentive for righteous conduct. The

> policy under scrutiny is known today as the **Retribution Principle** (RP): **the righteous prosper and the wicked suffer**. …
>
> The Challenger's claim is therefore that God's policy of rewarding the righteous actually undermines, if not subverts, the very righteousness that he seeks to foster. … The RP has the potential of turning would-be righteous people into "benefit mercenaries" as it trains them to ask, "What's in it for me?" [8]

Job does not know why everything went bust, but he *did not charge God with wrongdoing* (verse 22). God is not doing wrong, Job says, even when the justice of retribution is not functioning. That's astounding, an important insight for this book.

1.5 The test continues (Job 2)

If we're to cover another 41 chapters, we'll need to speed up now.

Has God's case been proven? Is God's confidence in Job been justified? The accuser is not satisfied. If Job suffered physically, would he give up on God? The court gives the adversary permission to afflict Job with painful sores all over his body (2:7).

Job is a terrible sight as he sits in the dust, scratching his itching sores with a piece of broken pottery. He's completely shamed. His wife believes God has it in for him. Choosing her words very carefully, she encourages Job to disassociate himself from the unjust heavenly tyrant who causes good people to suffer (2:9).

But not everyone has given up on Job. Three friends come to care for him:

> **Job 2:11-13 (NIV)**
>
> 11 When Job's three friends, **Eliphaz** the Temanite, **Bildad** the Shuhite and **Zophar** the Naamathite, heard about all the troubles that had come upon him, they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and comfort him. 12 When they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him; they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads. 13 Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was.

There are no words for the loss Job was feeling. Nothing they could say would make a difference to Job's suffering. Have you ever waited in silence with someone for a whole week? They waited until Job was ready to talk. Don't be quick to speak.

The greatest gift you can give a suffering person is your presence.
As we'll see later (Job 38–42), presence trumps retribution.

[8] John H. Walton and Kelly Lemon Vizcaino, *NIV Application Commentary: Job* (Zondervan, 2012), 21.

1.6 Conclusion

What are your experiences with suffering? Are you okay with the narrator lifting the curtain on the nature of suffering, especially undeserved suffering?

Next week, the drama begins. In Job 3–11 we hear the first round of discussion as Job and his friends struggle to understand why Job is being treated like this.

Further reading

John Walton summarizes the purpose of the Book of Job:

> In summary, then, the purpose of this book is to explore God's policies with regard to suffering in the world, especially by the righteous or the innocent. In the process it seeks to revolutionize our thinking about God and the way that he runs the world. Most importantly, the book shifts our attention from the idea that God's justice (represented in the "retribution principle") is foundational to the operation of the world to the alternative that God's wisdom is the more appropriate foundation. It does not offer a reason for suffering and does not try to defend God's justice. It does not answer the "why" question that we are so prone to ask when things go wrong. Instead, we are to trust God's wisdom and, in the process, to conclude by faith that he is also just.[9]

John Goldingay explains Satan's accusation, "Does Job serve God for nothing?":

> The adversary's suggestion is that the relationship between God and Job may be more like a contract than a covenant. Okay, Job is a man of unequalled integrity, straightness, respect for God, and discipline in avoiding evil. But he is also a man of unequalled prosperity. Are these two facts linked in an unhealthy way? Is Job committed to God only because of what he gets out of it? [10]

Gerald Wilson explains the phrases "the sons of God" and "ha satan":

> The NIV's translation of *bene haʾelohim* as **angels** (generally Heb. *malʾak*) is unusual. These are better understood as the "children of God," or divine beings who carry out the will and purposes of Yahweh, the God of Israel.
>
> **1:7** … The NIV has chosen (probably for theological reasons) to translate the Hebrew *hassatan* as the name Satan rather than as the title that the presence of the definite article (*ha*) suggests—"*the* Accuser." [11]

[9] John H. Walton and Kelly Lemon Vizcaino, *NIV Application Commentary: Job*, (Zondervan, 2012), 22.

[10] John Goldingay, *Job for Everyone*, Old Testament for Everyone (SPCK, 2013), 13–14.

[11] Gerald H. Wilson, *Job*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Baker Books, 2012), 22.