

# JOB

FAITH REMAINS WHEN  
UNDERSTANDING FAILS



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SUGGESTIONS FOR LEADERS  
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# JOB

## A TEST OF FAITH

**T**he *book of Job* contains some of the oldest material in the Bible, sections so old we do not even know their date. Yet, despite this, Job remains one of the most timely and oft-read biblical books of every generation. The reason for this is simple: The book wrestles with difficult questions that are part of ordinary human experience, regardless of the time in which one lives.

**AN ANCIENT TALE** The oldest written form of Job's story is contained in the prose sections of the book (1:1—2:13; 42:7—17), although some portions of that original account may have been lost. (To see how the story was first told, read these sections consecutively.) The basic plot tells how Job was tested and proven faithful, but the real point was to explain why bad things sometimes happen to righteous people.

The question is an old one, as texts from Mesopotamia demonstrate. One piece, known as the Babylonian Theodicy, is a dialogue between a sufferer and his friend, much in the style used in the *book of Job*. The sufferer wants to understand what has happened to him, and the friend offers various explanations. Another text, called "I will praise the Lord of Wisdom," is the lament of a wealthy Babylonian who has suffered great misfortune. He questions why these things have happened, yet ultimately has no answer.

The text has many parallels with Job's own speeches, particularly those in *chapters 9, 12–14, 21, and 29–31*. Perhaps the oldest text related to this theme, however, is "[Mortal] and God." This tale from the third millennium B.C., recorded in *Near Eastern Religious Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, edited by Walter Beyers, tells of an unnamed man who, through no fault of his own, has suffered tragedy. In spite of the unfairness of the situation, the man does not protest his fate. Instead, he humbly prays for deliverance, which is granted. Because this teaching so closely parallels the prose part of Job, this text is often referred to as "the Sumerian Job" (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1978).

It is easy to see, then, that Job's story had many parallels in the ancient Near Eastern world. Regardless of their culture, people noticed when a good person suffered (particularly themselves), and they asked why. At some point, so long ago that we cannot trace the date, Job's own story began to be told as one answer to that question.

### LESSON 1

1:1—2:13 613  
42:7—17

#### KEY IDEA

The original prose story of Job challenges us to take seriously our relationship with God—the Giver of life's fullness.

**MESOPOTAMIA:** *The region between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in modern Iraq*

**THEODICY:** *Defense of God's goodness and power, despite evil's presence*

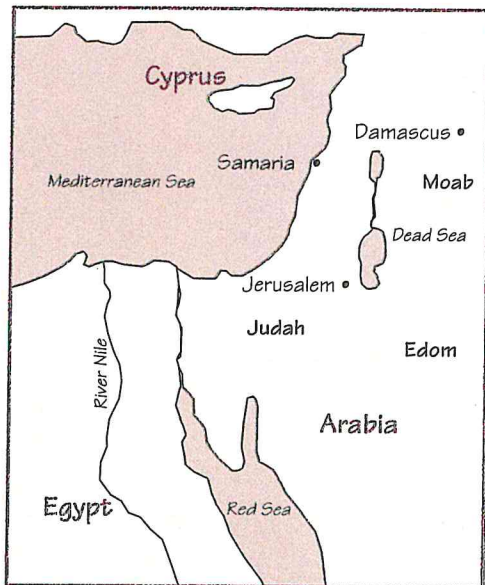
**SUMER:** *The first major civilization of the ancient Near East*

- 1 What difference does it make to you, if any, that Job's story has parallels in other cultures?
- 2 Do you see modern Jobs in our world? What do they teach you about persistent faith?
- 3 Try to remember one of the first times you questioned life's fairness. What were the circumstances? What did you learn?

**EDOM:** A region bordering Israel south of the Dead Sea; its people worshiped fertility gods and were considered wise. See Ez. 14:14–20. 84

In Hebrew, the name “Job” may mean “Where is the divine father?” or “hated/persecuted one.”

Pronounced *ha-sah-tan*; “*ha*” means “the” in Hebrew.



**EDOM**

## HOW IT ALL BEGAN

The original story opens by talking about Job himself. Surprisingly, he is not a Hebrew but a native of the land of Uz. The exact area meant by this is unknown, but some equate it with the land of Edom. Job is “blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil” (1:1). Indeed, Job goes to great lengths to avoid sinning, even unknowingly—the text tells how he made offerings on behalf of his children in case they had sinned and had made him responsible (v. 5)!

Moreover, Job is a fortunate man. He has seven sons and three daughters (v. 2). Some scholars think both seven and three were significant numbers to the Hebrews, and that they indicated completeness and wholeness. In other words, Job is as blessed in these children as he can be. He is blessed with physical wealth as well: He has enough livestock and servants to be considered “the greatest of all the people of the east” (v. 3).

The scene then shifts from earth to heaven. Here we have a glimpse of one ancient view of God and heaven. The early Hebrews pictured God as a ruler who, like human rulers, was surrounded by a court. As in the earthly parallel, most of the beings in that court were mere followers or servants, but a few served a special purpose. One of the most important members of the heavenly court was called *ha-satan*, which means “the Adversary.”

*Ha-satan*’s role is not what we would assume today. We think of the fallen angel, the personification of all evil named Satan many centuries after this story was written. Those who first told Job’s story, however, had never heard of that “Satan.”

The being called *ha-satan* here is actually the guardian of God’s holiness and justice. His job is to patrol the earth and to make sure no one receives anything from God they do not deserve. Indeed, his specific duty is to test people’s righteousness and loyalty to God, to ensure their faith is genuine. Anything less is not worthy of the Lord whom he serves. Thus, the title “Adversary” is not meant to imply that *ha-satan* is opposed to God. Rather, it is used in the legal sense of one who argues a case in court.

So, when God mentions Job and praises him as a man of faith, *ha-satan* does his job. He scrutinizes Job’s life and asks, in essence, “How can we know for sure that Job’s reverence for you is genuine? Maybe he only praises you because of all he has been given. Take away what he has and then we can better assess his faith.” God accepts this line of argument and agrees, on the condition that Job himself not be touched.

If this reasoning seems simplistic, it is. The prose account of Job’s trial treats God, *ha-satan*, and Job as generic figures. The individuals do not matter, only the lesson to be learned.

*Ha-satan* challenges each of us to consider whether we take God for granted in some way. Do we always reverence and worship God with the depth and intensity we should? Do we live in constant awe before the all-holy, all-mighty God? For most of us, the answer is no. Thus, the question becomes one of spiritual discipline: What can I do to take my relationship with God more seriously? The account of the heavenly court scene may be simplistic, but the challenge it presents certainly is not.

### JOB'S TEST

Chapter 1:13–19 tells of Job's first test. The horror of these events is conveyed in the storytelling itself. In rapid succession, Job hears of one loss after another. Each new message arrives before the previous one is completed. Moreover, each loss is greater than the one before.

First, Job learns of the loss of his work animals, the oxen and donkeys, and of the human servants who tended them. Next, news arrives of the loss of his food herd, the sheep, and of those who watched them. Then, word comes that he has lost his camels (the most valuable animals because they allowed trade and travel), as well as the servants in charge of them. Then comes the worst news. In a single accident, all of Job's children have been destroyed while they were feasting together.

Although he is a Gentile, Job's response is a model of perfect righteousness. In other words, both his deeds and his attitude reflect the proper respect for God and for others required in the Hebrew faith. First, Job performs the ancient acts signifying supreme grief (tearing his robe and shaving his head), and then he worships God (v. 20). He never doubts all of this is God's doing. Instead of blaming God, however, Job acknowledges God as the original source of all his good gifts—and, based on that awareness, Job acknowledges God's right to take the gifts away, however painful the loss might be. Job does not question God nor does he "charge God with wrongdoing" (v. 22).

For many readers, a basic issue of fairness is at stake in these verses. Job's test leads to the death of unnumbered innocent people and thousands of animals. What is fair about this? Where are their rights? The answer, dissatisfying as it might be, is that the biblical writer did not care about such issues. The children, servants, and animals are more important for the loss they represent than for their individuality.

People who wrote this story would have been confused by the above questions. If any answer at all was offered, it would probably be, "Fairness has nothing to do with it. God can do whatever God wants, and *ha-satan* had to test Job somehow."

### BUT WAIT! THERE'S MORE

Once the test is over, one might expect Job's show of piety to be enough. Surely his faith is pure if he can worship God after such tragedy! In fact, God is satisfied with Job's reaction. God boasts to *ha-satan* of Job's goodness a second time, stating, "He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason" (2:3).

The Adversary's job is not done yet. God put a condition on the first test, limiting how far it could go. *Ha-satan* respected that restriction and did not touch Job himself. Now he argues, asking how Job's show of faith can be trusted when he has not known physical suffering. Affecting him personally will allow a true assessment of his faith. Once again, God agrees.

So *ha-satan* inflicts "loathsome sores" over Job's whole body (v. 7). Job is reduced to scraping these with a broken piece of pottery as he sits among ashes (v. 8). Job's wife, the one family member whom he has not lost, encourages him to end his misery. "Curse God and die," she says, wanting him to get this over with (v. 9). Given the loss she has suffered with Job, perhaps she longs for



- 1 In what ways do you take God for granted?
- 2 Name three spiritual disciplines that might help you live your life in Christ more faithfully.
- 3 What is your experience with a spiritual, personal, or political adversary?

**GENTILE:** *not a Jew; earliest meaning—inhabitant of one of seven nations surrounding Israel*

**RIGHTEOUSNESS:** *Being in the right; having upright conduct; doing justice*



- 1 How do you feel about what happens to Job? To his children, servants and animals?
- 2 How do you feel about God's role in these events? Ha-satan's?

*The Hebrew Bible substitutes "bless" for "curse God," so no one will accidentally curse God and unintentionally sin.*

**SHIVAH:** *A period of mourning after the death of a loved one*

- 1 When have you felt “tested” by God? How did you respond? Has God ever “tested” your congregation or the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)? If so, how did they respond?
- 2 In what ways have friends comforted you in times of suffering?
- 3 Is there someone you know who needs comforting now? If so, what can you do for this person?

- 1 What gets you through difficult times?
- 2 What is the best you have to offer God? That your church has to offer?

death herself. Job’s response is as faithful as before. He will accept whatever fate God decrees for him, good or bad (*vs. 9–10*).

At this point, the text introduces Job’s three friends: “Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite” (*v. 11*). Like Job, they are not Hebrews; rather, the place names indicate they are from northwest Arabia. These three met and then traveled together with the intent of comforting Job.

When they find their friend, they raise their voices and weep aloud; they tear their clothes and throw dust in the air upon their heads (*v. 12*). In the ancient Near East, these actions were common expressions of great grief. After this, the three followed the custom known as sitting *shivah* (still observed among Jews) for seven days and seven nights. The friends say nothing to Job, “for they saw that his suffering was very great” (*2:13*).

**THE END RESULT** <sup>654</sup> Skipping ahead to the last verses of the book reveals the end of the original story (*42:7–17*). For now, note that pious, long-suffering Job is deemed righteous by God at last. Furthermore, Job receives double the wealth he had before, and he has another family of seven sons and three daughters. While we might question whether this can make up for the children who died, such is not the concern of the original story. The point is that Job received all he had before, plus more, because he was faithful in his testing.

The story of Job was originally remembered and told to affirm two beliefs: (1) No suffering is without meaning, and (2) faithfulness is rewarded. While these beliefs were not uniformly accepted by the entire community of faith, they were a source of genuine comfort to those who did hold them.

The community as a whole could still recite and find meaning in the original account for another reason, however. More than affirming a simplistic system of reward, the story of Job testifies that the Holy God deserves the very best humans have to offer. God deserves complete reverence, deepest awe, and absolute love. To offer anything less to God is an offense. This is the theological truth in Job’s story that all members of the faith community could accept and embrace.

## CLOSING

The original Job story affirms that God cares for us and is with us despite all suffering and tragedy. Using language deeply rooted in the Christian tradition, the apostle Paul made the same point when he wrote:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . No, in all things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

—Rom. 8:35, 37

## PRAYER

*Oh God, when life turns hard  
and seems too much to bear,  
we gain strength by remembering  
your love for us.*

*We thank you for that love—  
demonstrated in the life, death,  
and resurrection of Jesus Christ.*

*Amen.*

# JOB

## WHY ASK WHY?

### LESSON 2

3:1-26 424

#### KEY IDEA

God lets us ask  
“why?” and takes  
our questions  
seriously.

**THEODICY:** see page 7.

**POETRY:** *Writing arranged to create an emotional response through rhythm, meaning, and sound*

One of the central questions in human existence is *why*? We begin asking it as small children, often to the aggravation of parents and caregivers. We continue to ask *why* as adults, even when we know no answer may be forthcoming. We can't help but ask. As human beings, we want to understand ourselves and the world around us.

The community of faith has also asked this question throughout time. It has continued to ask, “If God is all-good and all-powerful, why does evil exist?” The theological exploration of this issue is called theodicy, and it forms the heart of the *book of Job*.

The early prose section of *Job*, discussed in the first session, offered one solution: evil and suffering occur because God is resting and disciplining people. While this answer satisfied some members of the faith community, others found it to be inadequate. These other voices are found in the poetry sections of the book, some of which may have been added as much as 500 years after the prose account was first written. One particular perspective (although not the only one) is represented by the poetic *Job* himself.

**FACING LIFE'S PAIN** Many of us have heard the phrase “the patience of *Job*” used to describe people who quietly endure hardship and suffering. While this phrase may fit the *Job* of the ancient prose story, it bears little resemblance to the *Job* of the poetry sections. This *Job* is no longer a stereotype of the faithful person: He is a powerful and moving representative of the human condition.

In *The Princess Bride*, a popular movie that came out several years ago, one character told another, “Life is pain.” The poetical *Job* seems to agree. He has experienced undeserved emotional and physical agony, and his suffering continues. He cannot explain the loss of his wealth, health, or children—but he recognizes that the pain of loss is tied to his ongoing existence. If only he could end his life, he could end the pain.

Indeed, *Job*'s suffering leads him to wish he had never been born at all. Whatever pleasures life may have offered before, they do not outweigh the tragedy in which *Job* now finds himself. He cries out:

*“Let the day perish in which I was born,  
and the night that said,  
'A man-child is conceived.'”*

*Why did I not die at birth,  
 come forth from the womb and expire?  
 Why were there knees to receive me,  
 or breasts for me to suck?  
 . . . . .  
 Or why was I not buried like a stillborn child,  
 like an infant that never sees the light?" (3:3, 11-12, 16)*

Despite the horror of his life, Job does not seek suicide, however. He laments being born, which led to this pain, yet he also accepts his tragedy as a "done deal." If Job were to die now, after the fact, he would lose all opportunity of vindicating himself. Job cries out against his pain, yet he refuses to let it win out. He persists in the hope against hope that he can one day prove his innocence and end the suffering through victory rather than defeat (see, for example, 13:18).

**TWO STORIES OF UNDESERVED SUFFERING**

The account of Job's persistence in the face of tragedy brings

to mind other stories. I am reminded, in particular, of two people I have known.

At first glance, these individuals have little in common. They live in different parts of the country and have different lifestyles. Their perspectives on religion, politics, and life in general are not the same. Yet, they share a bond of suffering each would understand and respect.

The first is a young man who is quite well-to-do. He has an impressive job and an even more impressive annual income. Like Job, however, he has known great sorrow.

There was a time when this young man and his wife were not getting along. For the sake of their child, however, they worked on their marriage. Eventually they reached full reconciliation and their life together became extremely happy. In joy, they planned their second child and the wife soon conceived. Then, when their happiness was at its highest, there was an accident: The wife and their unborn child were killed in a car crash.

The other person I remember is a young woman who desperately wanted a child. She and her husband had a relatively low income, so their options were limited when they had trouble conceiving. Eventually, after years of great personal sacrifice, they were able to afford some fertility procedures. The result was heartbreaking: She became pregnant four times and miscarried each time.

Finally the woman conceived and the pregnancy seemed to "take." She followed all of the doctor's advice and was careful not to endanger this high-risk child. The day came when she delivered, only two weeks early. That's when she first heard the dreaded words, "There seems to be a problem. . . ."

Her child was born with a severe mental disability. By the time the baby was a year old, doctors determined that he would probably never progress beyond the five- or six-months level. By the age of three, the child had still not crawled, spoken, or walked.

The woman loves her son a great deal and is grateful for whatever happiness she can bring into the child's life. Still, she grieves



- 1 Look in magazines or newspapers for horrible situations in which people find themselves today. What do you think gives people the courage to endure?
- 2 Reflect on your own life. At the time of greatest hardship, did you ever wish you had never been born? Why or why not?

- 1 What answers to *why*? would you give to the two people in the above examples?
- 2 Share a story with a partner (or the group) of someone you know who persevered in the face of tragedy.



for what might have been. She grieves for the life her son will never know; she grieves for the other children she will never have. One man, one woman, both of whom have faced tremendous suffering. Both chose to persevere despite their pain. They cannot say for sure what enabled them to go on so stubbornly—it certainly wasn't always hope—yet, somehow, giving up was not the answer for them.

## SEEKING AND SHOWING HONESTY

The two people described above struggled with more than personal pain; they also struggled to understand what had happened to them. At the traumatic times in their lives, each asked, over and over, "Why?" Neither found an answer, but both struggled nonetheless for anything that would help them make sense out of the awful events they experienced.

Job seeks understanding from several sources. He asks *why* of himself, his friends, the universe, and God. Note that Job does not think understanding will make the pain go away, but he does hope it will make the pain easier to bear.

When answer after answer is inadequate, Job continues to wrestle with the hard questions of existence: Why did the innocent children, servants, and animals die? Why does the physical pain persist? Most of all, why did all of this happen to me?

Job not only seeks an honest answer from God but also feels free to approach God honestly. In asking *why*, Job is able both to express his pain and to complain about his current circumstances.

*"Therefore I will not restrain my mouth;  
I will speak in the anguish of my spirit;  
I will complain in the bitterness of my soul.  
.....  
I loathe my life; I would not live forever.*

*Let me alone, for my days are a breath."* (7:11, 16)

This may sound surprising to some. We do not always think of God as one who can be approached in anger or bitterness. Yet Job, like many of the prophets, shows that we can be honest in expressing our feelings to God.

The Hebrew people understood God to be a paradox or mystery. On one hand, God is holy and transcendent, completely unknowable by human beings. On the other hand, this same God engages in self-revelation, offering an intimate and personal relationship to those who want it. Thus, the Hebrews believed people could approach the holy God about anything—even life's pain.

The Psalms show how free some believers felt to express their feelings to God. There are more Psalms of lament than any other kind. People cried out in music and poetry when they experienced loss, pain, illness, persecution, or other forms of suffering. Sometimes the expectation was that God would act to change the situation, but not always. Sometimes the psalmist cried out only to get God's attention, only to feel heard.

We should take courage from the biblical example. Why is an honest question we can bring to the God who lets us approach. Whether we ask why as a cry, a complaint, or both, what matters is that God lets us ask, and God takes our asking seriously. As we

**PARADOX:** *Something true that seems to contradict itself*

*See, for example, Psalms 6, 10, 13.*



will see later, we may not always get the answer we want from God, but we will be answered.

### WHO'S TO BLAME?

Job also demonstrates another truth: Human beings tend to cast blame. In this case, the search for understanding quickly leads to accusation. Job moves from asking God, "Why did you allow this?" to "Why did you do this?" In Job's mind, God clearly is the source of suffering:

*"I cry to you and you do not answer me;  
I stand, and you merely look at me.  
You have turned cruel to me;  
with the might of your hand you persecute me.  
You lift me up on the wind, you make me ride on it,  
and you toss me about in the roar of the storm." (30:20-22)*

The view represented by the poetical Job is this: God is ultimately in control of everything; therefore, God must be in control of my suffering. Job also takes this one step further, saying that God must ultimately be the source of all suffering. Note, however, this is only one perspective given in the *book of Job*; we will study others in later sessions.

Modern Christians continue to ask the questions found throughout this ancient Hebrew book: Does God have power over evil and suffering? Does God cause bad things to happen, or only allow them? How can either possibility be reconciled with God's holiness and love without denying God's power and sovereignty?

These questions have no easy answers, just as there are no easy answers to the question *why*. Nonetheless, we take our cue from *Job 3:1-42:6*, where Job questions the events in his life and complains about them. Job is not a silent victim; he engages his pain and his God through his cries. He continues to ask *why* because it is part of the very nature of human beings to do so.



- 1 What sort of events cause you to ask God why?
- 2 When have you found it difficult to approach God honestly? When has it been easy?

- 1 What are your answers to the questions in the next to last paragraph below?
- 2 As a result of today's lesson and discussion, whom will you add to your prayer list? Write the names down in the space provided below or on a separate sheet of paper.

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### CLOSING

Throughout the ages, people of faith have reached out to God in times of tragedy or distress. *Psalms 130*, for example, grew out of some unnamed trouble. The psalmist cried out to God for help, then eagerly waited for God to respond in power and love:

*Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.  
Lord, hear my voice!  
.....  
I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,  
and in his word I hope;  
my soul waits for the LORD  
more than those who watch for the morning.  
O Israel, hope in the LORD!  
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,  
and with him is great power to redeem.*

—vs. 1, 5-7

### PRAYER

*Like the psalmist,  
we cry to you, O God,  
from "out of the depths."  
Grant us the courage to wait  
for your word in hope.  
Amen.*



# DOES GOD PLAY FAIR?

Job's three friends help trace another step in the dialogue that developed within the community of faith concerning why evil and suffering exist. The friends offer some traditional explanations for human suffering, while Job presents arguments against the traditional views. (We will focus on the arguments of Eliphaz and Bildad in this session, and those of Zophar next time.)

Briefly put, the friends maintain God works in the world through a system of reward and punishment that is reliable and fair. Job, however, sees no evidence of such a system at work in nature or in human life. He questions whether God plays fair at all.

**A BIT OF HISTORY** The *book of Job* represents a spiritual crisis in Jewish life: historical events were destroying the people's belief in divine justice. If most of the poetry sections of Job are from the period of the exile and after, then this makes sense. The people of Israel and Judah had been totally defeated in 722/721 B.C. and 587/586 B.C., respectively. They had seen their places of worship, most notably the Temple in Jerusalem, destroyed. They had watched their religious and political leaders be killed or exiled. Once in exile, they faced the new threat of being absorbed into the culture around them, of losing all that gave them their unique identity as God's people. Where was the justice in this, they cried.

The writers and editors of the Deuteronomistic history (mostly found in *Joshua-Kings*) tried to answer this question by saying, "The nation is being punished for failing to obey God's laws." Similar reasoning led Job's friends to tell him he has sinned and therefore brought this on himself.

For some, however, this explanation was not enough. Like Job, these people looked at the world around them and said, "No, this is not fair. How can God allow such a thing? How can God do such a thing?" The community's attempts to answer these painful and difficult questions were, in part, preserved in the poetic dialogue of the *book of Job*.

**A TRADITIONAL RESPONSE** Throughout the *book of Job*, the speeches of the three friends vary in emphasis, yet each seeks to uphold the traditional theory that a fair system of reward and punishment is at work in the world. "Ultimately, everyone gets what they deserve," the friends say, in effect. "The world is a corrupt place, full of sinners, but at least God is willing to reward those who are penitent and punish those who aren't."

## LESSON 3

421  
8:1-7, 20-22;

428  
9:1-4, 14-15

### KEY IDEA

Job questions his friends' belief that God has a fair system of rewarding the righteous and punishing sinners.

**EXILE:** *The sixth-century BC period when part of the Judean population was taken to Babylon*

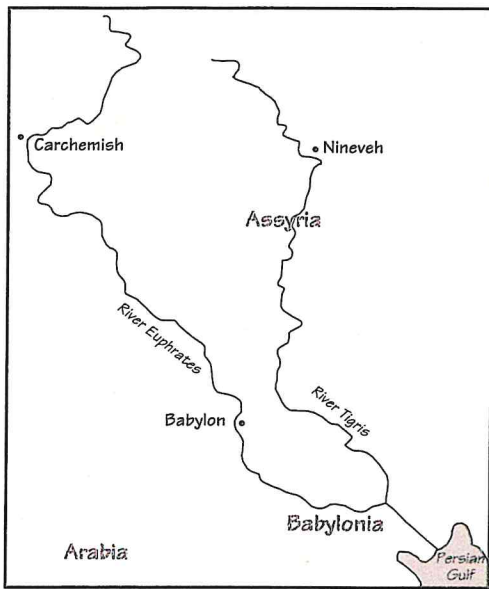
### DEUTERONOMISTIC

**HISTORY:** *Editors rewrote Israel's story to show how destruction was due to unfaithfulness to God's covenant with Abraham.*

- 1 What events from history do you think might destroy someone's belief in divine justice?
- 2 What are some responses—through confessions, declarations, and study papers—the church has offered at these times?

?

**PIT:** A figurative expression for where the dead go; a grave



### BABYLONIA 750-575 B.C.

This belief in God's system of reward and punishment is ancient. It predates most of the written sections of the Bible and can be found in various texts, especially in *Proverbs*. Consider *Prov. 28:18*, for example:

*One who walks in integrity will be safe,  
but whoever follows crooked ways will fall into the Pit.*

Why? Because . . .

*The eyes of the LORD are in every place,  
keeping watch on the evil and the good. (15:3)*

Of the three friends, Eliphaz speaks first in each stage of the dialogue (see *Job 4—5, 15, and 22*). In his opinion, Job is pious but lacking in submission. Eliphaz has two main arguments: the destruction of the wicked is certain, and no mortal is more righteous than God. In speaking of the wicked, for example, he says:

*“Think now, who that was innocent ever perished?  
Or where were the upright cut off?  
As I have seen, those who plow iniquity  
and sow trouble reap the same.  
By the breath of God they perish,  
and by the blast of his anger they are consumed.” (4:7-9)*

Because Eliphaz believes in human sinfulness and in the system of divine retribution, he also believes Job has sinned in some way. Only this explanation makes sense to him. Thus Eliphaz encourages Job to accept God's discipline, which will result in restoring Job to favor.

*“How happy is the one whom God reproves;  
therefore do not despise the discipline of the Almighty.  
For he wounds, but he binds up;  
he strikes, but his hands heal.  
He will deliver you from six troubles;  
in seven no harm shall touch you.” (5:17-19)*

Bildad supports Eliphaz's view and adds great detail to the description of the destruction of the wicked (*chs. 8, 18, 25*). He thinks Job must admit his faults so God can forgive him. Bildad agrees with Eliphaz that humans are guilty by nature, and he suggests that Job may have sinned through his children. (The ancient Hebrews believed a person's sins affected the purity of others in their family, making them guilty by extension. This is what Bildad means in 8:4.) Thus, Bildad urges Job to stop arguing his innocence and to make amends for any unintentional sin on his part.

*“How long will you say these things,  
and the words of your mouth be a great wind?  
Does God pervert justice?  
Or does the Almighty pervert the right?  
If your children sinned against him,  
he delivered them into the power of their transgression.  
If you will seek God  
and make supplication to the Almighty,  
if you are pure and upright,*

*surely then he will rouse himself for you  
and restore to you your rightful place.  
Though your beginning was small,  
your latter days will be very great.” (8:2–7)*

Bildad also agrees with Eliphaz that God will restore one who is repentant. If Job does as his friends ask and approaches God contritely, then God will make everything right. To Bildad, it’s all part of that system of fair reward and punishment, he says:

*“See, God will not reject a blameless person,  
nor take the hand of evildoers.  
He will yet fill your mouth with laughter,  
and your lips with shouts of joy.  
Those who hate you will be clothed with shame,  
and the tent of the wicked will be no more.” (8:20–22)*

**BUT IT’S NOT FAIR** Job rejects all these attempts to explain away what has happened to him. His views—which run through out *chapters 6, 9–10, 12–14, 16–17, 19, 21, 23, 26, and 27*—contain many powerful statements, but two key arguments stand out.

First, Job maintains his innocence on all counts. Eliphaz and Bildad are wrong: There are some good and innocent people in the world, and Job is one of them.

Second, Eliphaz’s opinion that this is a case of God’s discipline makes no sense to Job because the circumstances are so extreme (6:1–4). Not only does Job fail to see where he has done wrong (6:24, 30), he cannot imagine doing anything bad enough to deserve what has befallen him (7:11–21).

To Bildad, Job replies that there is no fair system of reward and punishment at work. In Job’s experience, the wicked do not suffer, but prosper. In fact, at this point in Job’s life, God seems so far removed from life on earth that Job has trouble believing any human behavior, good or bad, affects God at all. Rather than upholding fairness and retribution, God “destroys both the blameless and the wicked” (9:22). Job asks why he should be good, if this is the result. His lot is unfair, but what can he do about it?

Job’s sentiments are echoed in *Ps. 73:3–14*. There, the psalmist describes the fate of the wicked: they do not have the pain and trouble of others; rather, they grow rich and comfortable. Their bodies are “sound and sleek” (v. 4). They live in ease and, although they treat others with malice and violence, they continue to prosper. How can God let this happen, wonders the psalmist.

Job wonders also. In fact, Job is so sure of his innocence that he can only understand God as having acted out of malice. God, once Job’s friend and comforter, now seems to be Job’s enemy. For, as Job asks, “If it is not [God], who then is it?” (9:24).

**IS GOD ACCOUNTABLE?** In Job’s eyes, the situation is made worse by the fact that no fair balance of power exists: God has full control while Job has none. Indeed, as Job sees it, God’s absolute power has now turned against Job and threatens his very existence.

Thus Job takes Eliphaz and Bildad’s argument and gives it an

?

- 1 Do you agree with the friends’ statement in the first paragraph that there is a fair system of reward and punishment at work in the world? Give reasons for your answers.
- 2 What examples from your own life would you use to answer Eliphaz and Bildad?

**RETRIBUTION:** *The principle of repayment in kind (Ex. 21:23–25) opposed by Jesus (Matt. 5:38–42)*

?

- 1 What do you think of Job’s perception of God as “the enemy”? Have you ever felt this way about God?
- 2 Have you personally observed that tragedy befalls good people while the wicked seem to prosper? If so, how do you explain it?

**CONTEND/ANSWER:** *terms used for legal disputes, such as those described in Deut. 19:16–19 and Prov. 18:17*

**UMPIRE:** *an arbiter who listens to the complaints of both sides*

unexpected twist. “You are right,” Job seems to say. “No human being is a match for God—and that’s why everything is so unfair!” In Job’s view, no one has a chance before God:

*“[B]ut how can a mortal be just before God?  
If one wished to contend with him,  
one could not answer him once in a thousand.  
He is wise in heart, and mighty in strength  
—who has resisted him, and succeeded?—  
.....  
How then can I answer him,  
choosing my words with him?  
Though I am innocent, I cannot answer him;  
I must appeal for mercy to my accuser.” (9:2–4, 14–15)*

This seems far from a fair system at work, Job tells Eliphaz and Bildad. God can do whatever God wants, and human beings are powerless to prevent it. Moreover, no higher court of appeal exists to which Job can turn, no divine watchdog to whom God must answer:

*“He snatches away; who can stop him?  
Who will say to him, ‘What are you doing?’ (9:12)*

God makes the rules, stacks the deck, and wins every time. One can protest but what good will it do? God will win every argument! Thus, Job speaks in despair:

*“For he is not a mortal, as I am, that I might answer him,  
that we should come to trial together.  
There is no umpire between us,  
who might lay his hand on us both.” (9:32–33)*

In spite of this, or perhaps because of it, Job longs to confront God. Indeed, Job wishes he could take God to court! If only he had the chance to argue his side, he could prove his innocence!

In a speech that reflects courtroom language, Job states his desire:

*“But I would speak to the Almighty,  
and I desire to argue my case with God.  
.....  
I have indeed prepared my case;  
I know that I shall be vindicated.  
Who is there that will contend with me?” (13:3, 18–19)*

Yet even as he speaks, Job expects to be disappointed, because he sees nothing in the created order to which God is accountable. There is nothing that ensures God plays fair, and Job longs for such a structure. In a way, Job is offering to take on the role himself: It is as if Job says, “I want you to be accountable to me. I want you to explain yourself and make amends.”

Job’s intent here is not to take God’s place, but to restore some of his former relationship with God. This is one of the most moving aspects of Job’s speeches. The friends argue the traditional view of retribution, hoping Job can find comfort in its simplistic approach to life. Job rejects this easy answer, however, and holds to what his experience teaches him: Suffering does

come to the innocent because, as far as Job can tell, God uses power unfairly. In spite of this, however, all of Job's efforts—his cry for an umpire (or mediator) and his courtroom challenge—are designed to end the conflict and bring him back into relationship with God. Job misses the God whom he knew as a friend; he wants to prove his innocence so that he can have that friendship back.

Does God play fair? Is God accountable? Job answers with a resounding *no* that grieves him to the core. Perhaps Job is shortsighted. From one perspective, God is accountable indeed—to the divine self—and therefore God cannot help but be fair. God must be true to the divine nature: “for I am God and no mortal” (*Hos. 11:9*). This is a discussion we must save for lesson 8.

- 1 Have you ever felt the need for an umpire or mediator between you and God? If so, when?
- 2 What do the following scripture passages say about how Christ performs the role of mediator for us: *Col. 1:15–23; Heb. 4:14–5:10; 1 John 2:1–2; 1 Tim. 2:5–6?*
- 3 In what ways has God acted consistently and steadfastly in your life?



## CLOSING

Time and again, the Hebrew scriptures testify to God's steadfast love and constant care. Job began to doubt God's use of divine power, but *Psalms 56* gives a different witness.



## PRAYER

*O Most High, when I am afraid,  
I put my trust in you.  
.....  
You have kept count of my tossings  
.....  
In God, whose word I praise,  
in the LORD, whose word I praise,  
in God I trust; I am not afraid.  
Amen.*

—*vs. 2–3, 8, 10–11*

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*All titles were in print at the time of writing. They are available from Cokesbury, 201 Eighth Avenue, Nashville, TN 37202-0801. Order toll free 800/672-1789. Use item numbers when ordering.*

# JOB

## THE LIMITS OF WISDOM

Job's third friend, Zophar, represents an extension of the views upheld by Eliphaz and Bildad. Like those two, he believes in corrupt human nature and in the system of retribution. Indeed, Zophar delights in detailing the eventual fate of the wicked.

In particular, however, Zophar represents the wisdom tradition itself (that is, the school of thought that compared the behavior of wise and foolish people). While his main arguments contain views similar to those of Eliphaz and Bildad, Zophar connects everything to his understanding of wisdom and its role in human life. He firmly maintains that one needs wisdom to achieve righteous living, which in turn makes everything all right with God. In this, he is supporting a view that had developed fairly early within Israel's history.

As we have seen, however, by the time the later parts of Job were written, many of the wisdom tradition's teachings (preserved for us in *Proverbs*, *Ecclesiastes*, and some *Psalms*) had fallen into question. Thus, Job's responses to Zophar point out the limitations of wisdom's traditional stock answers to the question of undeserved suffering.

**THE GOAL OF WISDOM** The wisdom tradition had two primary goals:

(1) teach people how to live well: how to get along with God and neighbor so that one might prosper within society; (2) teach people a particular worldview, to offer them a lens through which they could study the world and make sense of it.

These two goals of the wisdom tradition complemented each other. By observing the order inherent in society and nature, one learned how to live wisely. By living wisely, one contributed to the order at work in the world. Wisdom tradition even went one step further on this last point. Tradition held that wise living not only maintained order in the world but also enhanced it.

Moreover, according to Leo G. Perdue in *In Search of Wisdom: Essays in Memory of John M. Gammie* (p.89), traditional wisdom teaching held that the cosmos was ultimately a good and friendly place. It was under the care of a just God who "worked in creation and history to sustain the righteous and to bring the wicked to destruction" (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993).

This is the view supported by Zophar. He believes that Job is suffering only because he lacks wisdom and understanding. The very proof of this lies in Job's persistent claims to innocence. No

### LESSON 4

11:1-6 428

12:1-4 429

#### KEY IDEA

Job's personal experience of suffering leads him to question the teachings of the wisdom tradition.

**WISDOM:** *The Hebrew belief that through observation, experience and reflection, one could know God's purpose with humankind*

**RETRIBUTION:** see p. 19

- 1 How do you define wisdom?
- 2 What are some characteristics of living wisely in relation to our bodies, our money, the global community, and ecology?

one is truly innocent, Zophar states, so Job's protestations show how much he does not know:

*"For you say, 'My conduct is pure,  
and I am clean in God's sight.'  
But oh, that God would speak,  
and open his lips to you,  
and that he would tell you the secrets of wisdom!  
For wisdom is many-sided.  
Know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt  
deserves." (11:4-6)*

Moreover, Zophar fully supports the wisdom tradition's teachings on reward and punishment. He maintains that if Job only corrects his attitude and lives right, then all will be well:

*"Surely then you will lift up your face without blemish;  
you will be secure, and will not fear.  
You will forget your misery;  
you will remember it as waters that have passed away.  
And your life will be brighter than the noonday;  
its darkness will be like the morning.  
And you will have confidence, because there is hope;  
you will be protected and take your rest in safety."  
(11:15-18)*

Zophar's goal, like that of wisdom in general, is to bring order where there is chaos. Basically, he tells Job, "You are not behaving correctly, nor do you properly understand what's happening to you. Please do as I suggest, so that you may receive your just reward, instead of what I can only assume is a just punishment."

## THE TEACHINGS OF EXPERIENCE

Job's response is not what Zophar wants or expects. Job turns the tables on Zophar and accuses him of being the one who is foolish. Zophar can only repeat what he has been taught, while Job can speak from experience—and his experience says that Zophar is wrong.

*"No doubt you are the people,  
and wisdom will die with you.  
But I have understanding as well as you;  
I am not inferior to you.  
Who does not know such things as these?  
I am a laughingstock to my friends;  
I, who called upon God and he answered me,  
a just and blameless man, I am a laughingstock." (12:2-4)*

Moreover, Job declares that the friends are foolish for defending God; they speak falsely and whitewash the case for God (13:4). They would be wiser to keep silent about things they do not fully understand (v. 5).

Job's sentiments echo various voices within the community of faith that criticized certain wisdom teachings (particularly those concerning retribution). As stated in lesson 3, several scholars believe that events of the late seventh—early sixth century B.C. brought about a faith crisis in Hebrew history. Certainly other



texts from this time period, such as *Habakkuk* (1:2–4, 13–17) and parts of *Jeremiah* (for example, 12:1–2), show a similar concern about why tragedies and injustices occur. These texts, like the later parts of *Job*, seek to understand the relationship between God and suffering. In fact, the later sections may have been added to *Job* because, as a result of the exile and other events. For the people of faith, God’s integrity became a much more burning issue than *Job*’s ever was. Perhaps that is why, in *Job*’s speeches, the cosmos is not pictured (as it is in traditional wisdom writings) as a friendly place, designed specifically to sustain the life of the righteous.

In sharp contrast to traditional wisdom’s view, *Job* argues from experience that life is short and meaningless because God destroys all hope:

*“A mortal, born of woman, few of days and full of trouble,  
comes up like a flower and withers,  
flees like a shadow and does not last.*

*For there is hope for a tree,  
if it is cut down, that it will sprout again,  
and that its shoots will not cease.*

*But mortals die, and are laid low;  
humans expire, and where are they?”* (14:1–2, 7, 10)

The same lack of faith in a benevolent order at work in the world is eloquently stated in *Ecclesiastes* 7:15 and 9:1–2:

In my vain life I have seen everything; there are righteous people who perish in their righteousness, and there are wicked people who prolong their life in their evildoing. . . .

All this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God; whether it is love or hate, one does not know. Everything that confronts them is vanity, since the same fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil.

**A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE** On the basis of their experience, therefore, more Jews began to doubt that a fair system of reward and punishment was in effect. Why innocent people suffer became a critical question. Those who still held to the theory of retribution were forced to develop counter arguments in order to explain such suffering. Among the explanations offered at various times were

1. God uses suffering to discipline/teach the foolish.
2. Suffering tests the quality of one’s faith.
3. Suffering is an inevitable part of the human condition; it has no connection to one’s moral state.
4. Undeserved suffering, freely endured, can sometimes benefit another person.
5. Suffering is one of God’s mysteries; there is no explanation.

For those who did not accept the theory of retribution, however, each of these explanations was inadequate. Thus, the theological conversation continued.

**EXILE:** see p.17



- 1 Wisdom tradition taught that the cosmos was basically a friendly place, designed to sustain and care for those who obey its laws. Do you agree or disagree with this belief? Why?
- 2 What is your response to the pessimistic view presented by the writers of *Job* and *Ecclesiastes*?

**RETRIBUTION:** see p. 19

- 1 Review the list of possible explanations on page 25 as to why people suffer. Do you agree with any of them? If so, which ones?
- 2 What is your congregation doing to promote theological dialogue among its members?
- 3 Identify three or four new voices to which your congregation is exposed. How do these voices enliven the church?

**REVELATION:** *Taken as a whole, the Old Testament shows how God is revealed in human history.*

**CULTIC WORSHIP:** *Formal acts performed to honor the deity*

We should not be distressed that various perspectives are found within the biblical account; rather, we should be grateful. One exciting message we can take from *Job* and the rest of wisdom literature is the necessity of dialogue for a healthy and vibrant faith. We are not created to be Christians in isolation but in community. We grow in our faith by asking questions and by seeking answers individually and with others. Sometimes discussion provides an answer we may never have considered on our own; sometimes no answer comes, but at least we know we are not alone in our questioning. The tradition of the community of faith is to confront together the difficult questions of existence.

The modern church is still learning the value of listening to answers from a variety of sources. The biblical authors were comfortable with multiple viewpoints; they often included a variety of perspectives with no attempt to reconcile them. The ancient Hebrews in particular felt truth was found in the whole of these views. Today, the church is rediscovering alternative avenues to truth in new voices. Our ongoing dialogue is not only with those like us; it is also with those of a different race, culture, and gender from ourselves. The result must be a richer and deeper exploration of life's mysteries than we would ever achieve alone.

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**RECOGNIZING LIMITS** Followers of the wisdom tradition who believed in retributive justice soon began to ask other questions about the nature of God. Thus, the debate eventually led to a discussion of revelation: How does one discover what God is really like? How is God's self revealed to us? How does one know God?

In ancient Jewish culture, in addition to prayer, the priests encountered God through ritual and cultic worship, while the prophets experienced special visions and revelations. Wisdom tradition taught that one could encounter God (and thus come to know God) by other routes, such as the following:

1. studying and remembering the traditional wisdom teachings
2. observing both everyday life and nature
3. reflecting rationally on the above and seeking their meaning for human life
4. drawing one's own conclusions about God and God's ways

Within this system, however, the sages were careful to acknowledge the limits of human experience and wisdom. No matter how hard one tries, they claimed, one can understand only so much in the end. Some areas of knowledge are reserved only for divine wisdom, which human beings will never share. According to the writer of *Ecclesiastes*:

When I applied my mind to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how one's eyes see sleep neither day nor night, then I saw all the work of God, that no one can find out what is happening under the sun. However much they may toil in seeking, they will not find it out; even though those who are wise claim to know, they cannot find it out (8:16–17).

The good news for Christians is that we are no longer subject to the same limitations. In Jesus Christ, God came into the world and revealed the divine self more concretely than ever before. We can look at Christ and see the nature of God in tangible form—something that no pre-first-century wisdom teacher could claim. We still do not know everything, but we can trust what Jesus has revealed about God. Furthermore, thanks to our relationship to God through Christ, we have cause for future hope. We can rejoice with Paul that “now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known” (*1 Cor. 13:12*).



- 1 In John 14:9, Jesus says, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” What does Jesus teach you about who God is?
- 2 In what other ways has God revealed the divine self to you: Through scripture? History? Prayer? People? Other means?

## CLOSING

While we can never fully know the mind of God, we have Christ’s promise that the Holy Spirit will bring us wisdom and insight. Thus, we can confidently make the same prayer for one another that Paul made for the Ephesians in *Ephesians 1:17–19*.

No, in all things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.  
—*Rom. 8:35, 37*



## PRAYER

*God of our Lord Jesus Christ, . . .  
we pray that you  
will give us a spirit of wisdom  
and revelation as we come to know you,  
so that, with the eyes of our heart enlightened,  
we may know what is the hope  
to which you have called us,  
what are the riches of your glorious  
inheritance among the saints,  
and what is the immeasurable greatness  
of your power for us who believe. Amen.*



# WHEN TRADITION FAILS

**A**s discussed in lessons 3 and 4, Job's three friends represent three different traditional ways of thinking. For Job, however, their words amount to platitudes that contain no meaning or truth:

*"Your maxims are proverbs of ashes,  
your defenses are defenses of clay."* (13:12)

Time and again the friends offer their perspective, which is grounded in their traditional faith. Time and again Job says, in effect, "Those answers don't work for me anymore!"

**A CASE FOR TRADITION** The friends do their best to convince Job that the traditional answers do make sense. They argue thoroughly, both from personal opinion and their own experience, that a reliable, visible system of fair reward and punishment is in effect.

The view defended by the friends is not the same one as found in the original prose story. In fact, the friends' theology differs from both that of the prose story and that of the poetical Job (that is, the Job of 3:3—42:6). The prose story presents Job's suffering as the result of divine testing, whereas Job's speeches in the poem say it is part of the unjust workings of a cruel God. In all the *book of Job*, only the three friends fight to defend the traditional view of retribution as a valid explanation for Job's tragedy.

**A THEOLOGICAL DIALOGUE** The dialogue between Job and his friends encapsulates the community of faith's own struggle to make sense of suffering in a world created by a good God. Virtually every major answer offered to explain this phenomenon is found in the dialogue. The entire conversation between 4:1—27:23 can be summarized as follows.

**ELIPHAZ:** Job, you must have sinned; you need discipline and reproof. Admit your guilt, and this will fix everything.

**JOB:** I did no wrong, and even if I did, I don't deserve what's happened to me.

**BILDAD:** If you didn't sin, then your children did. Be contrite and everything will be OK.

**JOB:** I'm innocent, but I can't win against God. God doesn't play fair. I'll never be able to prove my innocence at this rate!

**ZOPHAR:** You lack understanding, that's all. Seek wisdom. Right and wise living will make everything all right.

## LESSON 5

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429 7:17-21; 43  
12:14-25; 16:1-5

### KEY IDEA

The dialogue between Job and his friends captures the faith community's struggle to understand God's role in and responsibility for suffering.

?

- 1 In facing life's difficulties, when has an answer or perspective from the Presbyterian tradition proved helpful to you?
- 2 When has an answer or perspective from the Presbyterian tradition seemed inadequate?

- 1 Which of the above views are held by people in your congregation? By you?
- 2 Put yourself in Job's place within this dramatization. Now, rewrite Job's words in the space provided below to reflect what your own personal responses would be. What would change, if anything?

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**JOB:** Oh, I understand all right. I understand that I've done nothing wrong, yet God is punishing me. My experience teaches me all I need to know.

**ELIPHAZ:** There is proof of the system of retribution; consider the fate of the wicked.

**JOB:** The system has a fault in it; God punished me and I'm innocent.

**BILDAD:** No, Eliphaz is right.

**JOB:** Take another look, guys. There's a flaw in your theory. I'm innocent.

**ZOPHAR:** But look at the fate of the wicked!

**JOB:** And that's another thing. Not only does my experience show me that God punishes the innocent, but I also see that the wicked aren't always punished as you claim!

**ELIPHAZ:** Look, you're mortal, right? So you must have sinned at some point, and now you are being punished for it.

**BILDAD:** Yeah!

**JOB:** No, I'm really innocent of all wrongdoing, but because God is hiding from me, I can't even state my case and prove my innocence. What's fair about any of this? How can you possibly look at what's happening to me and be comfortable with your old familiar stock answers? Bah! Leave me alone!

**IS GOD THE ENEMY?**

Job's problem with tradition did not stop with the theory of retribution. Traditional theology taught that God cared intimately for the world and for its inhabitants. (This belief undergirded the friends' belief in a system of fair reward and punishment.) *Psalm 8* expresses the special relationship of God and humankind beautifully:

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*What are human beings that you are mindful of them,  
mortals that you care for them?*

*Yet you have made them a little lower than God,  
and crowned them with glory and honor.  
You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;  
you have put all things under their feet. (vs. 4-6)*

This is not Job's experience at all, though. In a tragic parody of the psalm, Job declares bitterly to God:

*"What are human beings, that you make so much of them,  
that you set your mind on them,  
visit them every morning,  
test them every moment?  
Will you not look away from me for a while,  
let me alone until I swallow my spittle?  
If I sin, what do I do to you, you watcher of humanity?  
Why have you made me your target?  
Why have I become a burden to you?" (7:17-20)*

Within the *book of Job*, tradition thinks God is kind, but Job thinks differently. Tradition says God acts consistently and fairly, but Job says otherwise. Tradition sees God as the loving Creator

who rules everything with benevolence and wisdom, but Job sees a divine terrorist.

According to Job, God does not bring order or wisdom to the world; rather, God engineers chaos and destruction to the natural world and to society. On a cosmic scale, one might expect a system of retribution, but in reality the wicked prosper—and God is responsible (12:7–12). On a societal level, God takes away wisdom and power from the very leaders who are supposed to bring justice (vs. 13–25). If one were to read these verses out of context, not knowing to whom they refer, one might actually think this was a description of the devil! This God who brings chaos instead of order should, in Job’s opinion, be removed from heaven’s throne.

Later, Job claims that God has exhibited the same chaotic and destructive behavior in Job’s own life.

*“God gives me up to the ungodly,  
and casts me into the hands of the wicked.  
I was at ease, and he broke me in two;  
he seized me by the neck and dashed me to pieces;  
he set me up as his target  
.....  
though there is no violence in my hands,  
and my prayer is pure.” (16:11–12, 17)*

The fate of the wicked also proves God’s callous nature. Those who do not follow God’s way receive a home, children, and possessions (21:8–10). Furthermore, to quote Claus Westermann in *The Structure of the Book of Job: A Form-Critical Analysis* (p. 89),

Added to these are health and long life (v. 7), the charming picture of the mirth of children (vv. 11–12), and a quick and easy death (v. 13). . . . Job sees and openly states that in the world there is such a thing as blessedness without blessing, divine favor without God, salvation without a savior (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981).

Job’s God is not the loving, caring God of tradition. This is a monstrous God who wants to hurt the innocent and profit the wicked. “The terrors of God are arrayed against me” (6:4). How can Job possibly find comfort in the friends’ familiar answers?

The friends, of course, condemn Job for speaking of God this way. Eliphaz says:

*“You are doing away with the fear of God,  
and hindering meditation before God.  
For your iniquity teaches your mouth,  
and you choose the tongue of the crafty.  
Your own mouth condemns you, and not I;  
your own lips testify against you.” (15:4–6)*

It is easy to see both sides of this argument. On one hand, Job has suffered a great deal—apparently at the whim of God—and he wants to talk honestly about his experience. On the other hand, the friends are upholding their tradition and their faith perspective. They sincerely believe Job is mistaken; they want to instruct him in order to comfort him.

- 1 Which Psalms stand out in your memory? How do they inform your view of God?
- 2 Compare the views of God below: Which is most like your own?

#### TRADITIONAL VIEW

God permits evil as a punishment for human sin. God always punishes wicked people.

#### JOB’S VIEW

God permits evil to affect innocent people. Sometimes the wicked prosper.

#### MY VIEW

- 3 The friends link instruction and comfort. Is this valid? Why?

## MEANINGFUL THEOLOGY

Within their dialogue, both the friends and Job have a tendency to talk “at” each other rather than “with” each other. Neither side listens very seriously to the other. One imagines that, instead of listening while another is talking, each is concentrating on what he will say next.

Of course, these speeches were never intended to be taken as dialogue in the sense of a play or novel, so there are limits to what we might expect. Still, it is interesting to examine the texts for clues that inform our own theological discussions.

One might note, for example, that the friends quote their tradition extensively but, in doing so, they never engage God in the conversation. They address Job, but never the Lord. James Crenshaw suggests in his book, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (p. 118), this is because their theology has somehow kept God at an impersonal level.

Job’s friends cherished religious conviction more than a vital relationship with the living God, for they believed in a rational deity who was enslaved by a greater principle: justice. . . . In such a theological system, the deity was reduced to the category of reaction. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1981).

As Job is quick to note, theology that does not entail dialogue with God and with one another is meaningless.

*“I have heard many such things;  
miserable comforters are you all.  
Have windy words no limit?  
Or what provokes you that you keep on talking?  
I also could talk as you do,  
if you were in my place;  
I could join words together against you,  
and shake my head at you.  
I could encourage you with my mouth,  
and the solace of my lips would assuage your pain.” (16:2–5)*

Job’s friends do have a few good characteristics. They genuinely want to help their friend, and they resolutely hold to their beliefs in the face of contradiction and argument. Such strong faith is not a bad thing. In fact, in many ways, it speaks well of the friends.

The friends are wrong, however, to justify God at Job’s expense. Their belief systems work for them, make sense to them, and are, for them, the truth. Nonetheless, in spite of their sincere efforts to help Job embrace their understanding of God and the world, they unintentionally use their beliefs to shut Job out. They do not hear what he is saying to them because they cannot accept the possibility their answers may not work for everyone. They are unwilling to allow a view of God different from their own to exist. Thus, they stifle Job’s theological voice and invalidate his own current personal experiences. In this, they are a model of what not to do when the church engages in theological dialogue today.

*A resource for theological dialogue: Seeking to Be Faithful Together: Guidelines During Times of Disagreement. (Louisville, Ky.: Congregational Ministries Division, 1993). English, #259-93-928; Spanish, #259-93-933; Korean, #259-93-936. .10 each. Order from Presbyterian Distribution Service (PDS), 800/524-2612.*

Does this mean the church should give weight to every opinion, no matter how heretical? No, of course not. We need to redefine heresy, however. It is not just any voice that is different from our centuries-old tradition. Modern, multicultural voices interpret the scriptures and find meaning in our tradition through their own gifts and insights. Not only is this good, it is vital to the church's healthy growth and continued existence. When the new (or old) voices counter the voice of God—which speaks through the Bible, tradition, experience, and the church today—then we need to reconsider listening to it. We should not just assume, however, that because the voice is new or different, it automatically counters God. Maybe God is speaking in a new way!

?

- 1 Do you have a friend or a small group with whom you can talk freely about God? If not, what would it take to cultivate one?
- 2 When has a "new voice" breathed life into an old tradition? Consider family life, school, the church, politics, and other areas.

## CLOSING

Christians live in the confidence that God still speaks to us through the Holy Spirit. With the Spirit's power, we are able to discern God's message in a multitude of voices. After all, Jesus promised:

"The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. . . . When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth . . ."

—John 14:26; 16:13

## PRAYER

*Lord Jesus Christ,  
we are your humble disciples.  
By the power of your Holy Spirit  
we hear and obey your commands.  
Teach us, Lord, to hear your voice  
speaking to us in the voices  
of all we meet and serve this day.  
Amen.*

## FIELD TESTERS

Committees appointed by the moderator of Presbyterian Women chose the topic for the 1997–98 HORIZONS Bible study in 1993 and the author in 1994. In spring 1995, HORIZONS selected field-testing groups from names suggested by the Presbyterian Women Churchwide Coordinating Team, synod representatives, and others.

Field-testing of the author's first draft took place between November 1995 and February 1996. All the field-testers' comments were carefully considered by the writer as she prepared her second draft of the study.

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# WHERE IS MY GOD?

So far, we have discussed the theological differences between Job and his friends. Under such circumstances, it is easy to think of their conversation as all “head stuff”—a group of educated laypeople debating serious, intellectual questions about God and the world.

While these speeches have much thought-provoking content, much also comes from the heart. Job and his friends all feel strongly about their views, and their beliefs strike an emotional core. The events in Job’s life are not mere “food for intellectual thought”; they are gut-wrenching, heartrending moments from which he will never fully recover. Not surprisingly, the severity of Job’s emotional crisis results in a spiritual crisis. How can the trauma of his tragedy fail to affect the emotional and spiritual aspects of Job’s relationship with his friends and with God?

**FEELING ALONE** The text shows that these relationships are indeed affected. Job’s anger and frustration with his friends stems from their unwillingness (or incapacity) to deal with him as he is right now. He feels theologically, emotionally, and spiritually distanced from them. “All my intimate friends abhor me,” he laments, “and those whom I loved have turned against me” (19:19).

The friends themselves contribute to this situation. In their initial speeches, they use persuasion to try to get Job to accept their theological “take” on things. When Job resists, the speeches then become rebuttals. Rather than truly talk with Job about his feelings and beliefs, the friends turn the discussion into a theological debate. When this in turn does not change Job’s view, the friends’ final speeches become outright accusations. The dialogue degenerates into sophisticated name-calling and mudslinging. No wonder Job seems to say, “I just can’t talk to you people!”

Job’s feelings of distance from God are even more severe. Job feels spiritually isolated, as if God is nowhere to be found—and Job misses his God.

**LONGING FOR GOD** In *chapter 7* Job wanted to hide from God. He could not get far enough away from the One whom he believed caused all his troubles. Job described God as the “watcher of humanity” (7:20), lying in wait for any opportunity to make a target of people in order to satisfy an unexplained malicious streak.

This is only part of the picture. No matter how hurt or angry Job may be—and no matter how much those feelings may be directed

## LESSON 6

23:3–9 <sup>434</sup>

### KEY IDEA

Job longs for a healing presence when his tragedy isolates him emotionally and spiritually from his friends and from God.

?

- 1 When have you felt isolated or lonely? What contributed to these feelings? What helped you to overcome them?
- 2 Think of an acquaintance, friend, or family member who may yearn for companionship. How can you reach out to this person?

A resource: *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* by Marjorie J. Thompson (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), \$12.99; 800/227-2872.

**REFORMED TRADITION:**

*Stemming from the 16th-century Protestant Reformation, the belief that all persons are directly responsible to God and can study scripture for themselves*

toward God—Job still yearns for the God of old. Partly Job wants to justify himself, and partly Job misses his friend and comforter.

*“Today also my complaint is bitter;  
his hand is heavy despite my groaning.  
Oh, that I knew where I might find him,  
that I might come even to his dwelling!  
I would lay my case before him,  
and fill my mouth with arguments.  
I would learn what he would answer me,  
and understand what he would say to me.” (23:2–5)*

Perhaps this is one reason that *Job* has remained such a beloved book. At times, we may feel God’s nearness very strongly and have a deep sense of spiritual nourishment as well. These “mountaintop” experiences, however, may be difficult to carry into daily life. Most of the time, the question is not “How do I find God in the midst of tragedy?” but “How do I find God in the kitchen or the laundry room?”

Job and his friends disagree radically over why Job is alienated from God. The friends argue that sin separates Job from God. Nothing more, nothing less. Job is human and therefore prone to sin; he somehow has sinned and, until he makes amends, this will be a barrier between him and God.

For example, Eliphaz says that Job, as a mortal, cannot create enough righteousness to impress God, but he can repent and be made right with God.

*“Can a mortal be of use to God?  
Can even the wisest be of service to him?  
Is it any pleasure to the Almighty if you are righteous,  
or is it gain to him if you make your ways blameless?  
.....  
Agree with God, and be at peace;  
in this way good will come to you.  
.....  
If you return to the Almighty, you will be restored.”  
(22:2–3, 21, 23)*

Bildad adds to this, saying Job is guilty because he is human.

*“Dominion and fear are with God;  
he makes peace in his high heaven.  
Is there any number to his armies?  
Upon whom does his light not arise?  
How then can a mortal be righteous before God?  
How can one born of woman be pure?  
If even the moon is not bright  
and the stars are not pure in his sight,  
how much less a mortal, who is a maggot,  
and a human being, who is a worm!” (25:2–6)*

What good Protestants these ancient people would make! The Reformed tradition holds as one of its main tenets (based largely on the writings of Paul) that sin separates us from God. Fortunately, Christ has come to break down that wall and to reconcile us to God. We rejoice with Paul that, “If anyone is in Christ, there is a news creation: everything old has passed away; see, every-

thing has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ" (2 Cor. 5:17-18). 934

**CUT OFF FROM GOD** From the midst of his pain and anguish, Job cries out, "No! It is not my fault I cannot find God. This is all God's doing!" It seems to Job, as he desperately seeks God, that God is more than absent—God is actively hiding.

*"If I go forward, he is not there;  
or backward, I cannot perceive him;  
on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him;  
I turn to the right, but I cannot see him."* (23:8-9)

Job and the friends represent two extreme responses to the question, "Why is God sometimes not there?" Perhaps they are asking the wrong question. They begin by assuming that God is actually absent. Is this really the case? Could it be that, instead, God is always present but their own emotional and spiritual upheavals keep them from recognizing God's presence? We will explore this possibility further in the next session.

Regardless of what one believes about God's continuous presence, the sense of spiritual isolation can be real, and it is an almost universal human experience. I say almost because I know a few people who say they have never lacked a sense of God's presence. I envy them in one way and, in another, I don't. The part of me that does not like pain wishes I had never experienced my own crises of isolation, times when I, too, could not find God when searching. A somehow wiser part of me knows, though, that my relationship with God is all the richer and more meaningful for those perceived times apart. My appreciation for the spiritual food I receive is deepened by my memory of spiritual famine.

Ironically, in those times I have felt cut off from God, it has helped me to remember that I am not alone in those feelings. Countless generations ago, a psalmist cried,

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?  
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my  
groaning?  
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;  
and by night, but find no rest.* (Ps. 22:1-2) 452

A few hundred years later, Jesus cried these same words from the cross. Sadly, feeling abandoned by God and alienated from one's spiritual center is part of being human.

**A HEALING PRESENCE** At such times, what we miss most is a true sense of presence. It has been said, "presence heals," and this is true. The original prose story about Job shows this. There, we read the three friends sat on the ground with Job "seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great" (2:13).

What a contrast with the way the same friends appear later in the book. Here they are neither argumentative nor preachy. Rather, they share Job's grief as completely as they can and,

?

- 1 When have you had a particularly strong sense of God's presence? Did it change anything for you? If so, what?
- 2 What in your life separates you from God? How can you combat this?

?

- 1 When have you experienced "spiritual famine" or a deep yearning for God's presence? What happened?
- 2 Do you agree with Job's view that God hides from us? Why?
- 3 What helps you when you feel cut off from God? What scripture passages, if any, comfort you at these times?

**THEOLOGY:** *The study of how God relates to the world*

- 1 Some biblical examples of God's healing presence (literal and metaphorical) include *Ps. 30, Ps. 63, Isa. 66:10–13, and Hos. 14:4–7*. Can you list others?
- 2 When have you received comfort and healing from another's presence? When have you provided this for someone else? *Dad + Mom*
- 3 What is your congregation doing to provide a healing presence for others? Invite a session member to come and tell your group what more might be done with your help.

when words fail, they provide the comfort of their presence in silence. The model of pastoral care presented in this text is amazingly sensitive and supportive.

One of the great tragedies in Job is how subsequent words get in the way of healing. The three friends had it right the first time; as their characters developed over time, however, theology became more important than presence. The friends were no longer portrayed as comforters.

In the *Book of Job* (see **For Further Reading**), Bible scholar H. H. Rowley discusses this issue in terms of the difference between theology and religion, which he defines as “encounter with God.” For Rowley, the meaning of Job is found in the latter.

Job's friends were persuaded that by sin Job had brought his sufferings upon himself, and that his troubles were the evidence that God had cast him off. Despite his consciousness of innocence, Job himself was persuaded that his sufferings were the evidence of his isolation from God. Though he could not understand God's enmity and often longed for the fellowship with God he had once known, he felt himself shut out from the presence of God. A false theology sapped the springs of religion, when religion was most needed (p. 19).

Job recognizes what he needs from God—a sense of healing Presence—and he longs for it. The good news is that, in the midst of his isolation, Job does not despair.

*“For I know that my Redeemer lives,  
and that at the last he will stand upon the earth;  
and after my skin has been thus destroyed,  
then in my flesh I shall see God,  
whom I shall see on my side.” (19:25–27)*

?

## CLOSING

When Jesus was on the cross, he experienced human despair. In agony, he quoted from *Psalms* 22: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (v. 1). The psalmist eventually affirms,

*“[God] did not hide his face from me,  
but heard when I cried to him.” —v. 24*

In a similar vein, *Psalms* 73 confesses:

*When my soul was embittered,  
when I was pricked in heart,  
I was stupid and ignorant;  
I was like a brute beast toward you.  
Nevertheless I am continually with you;  
you hold my right hand.  
My flesh and my heart may fail,  
but God is the strength of my heart and my  
portion forever. —vs. 21–23, 26*

## PRAYER

*We thank you, God,  
that you are always with us,  
even when our own physical  
and emotional stress  
make it difficult for us  
to sense your divine presence.  
Amen.*



# JOB IN DEFENSE OF GOD

## 439 LESSON 7 33:12–14, 26–28

### KEY IDEA

Elihu—Job’s fourth friend—changes the question of suffering from *why* to *who*, stressing God’s nature to seek relationship with humankind.

**ELIHU (ELIJAH):** *Means Yahweh is my God*

**ARAMAIC:** *A Semitic language spoken by the Hebrews after the Exile*

**H**ave you ever been in a situation in which you had to struggle to keep from saying something? Most of us know what it’s like to bite back words we long to say—and it is all the more difficult when we believe we are in the right. Most of us also know what it feels like to break the silence at last and say what’s truly on our minds.

This is the circumstance under which we meet Elihu, Job’s fourth friend. Elihu has not been mentioned prior to *chapter 32*, but now he bursts on the scene with passion and conviction. His speeches represent a new voice in the faith community’s effort to understand God’s connection to human suffering.

**THE VOICE OF YOUTH** The origin of the Elihu section is a mystery. No one is sure who wrote it, when, or why. As a result, scholars disagree over whether it was written by the same author as the rest of the poetry section in Job.

Those scholars who think these chapters represent a different writer cite three main reasons. First, Elihu’s speeches, unlike any others in the book, contain numerous Aramaic words. Second, these speeches have a different style from the others; Elihu quotes Job’s former speeches and God’s upcoming one quite a bit. Finally, Elihu seems to interrupt the flow: Job’s last words set the stage for God’s entrance into the drama (see *31:35–37*), but God does not actually appear until *chapter 38*, after Elihu has had his say.

Other scholars, however, see how Elihu’s speeches could have been part of the original poetry section. They point out that Elihu introduces a logical next step in answering Job; he provides another possible answer to Job’s questioning. Moreover, Elihu prepares us for God’s speeches in *chapters 38–41* by laying the appropriate theological groundwork. He gives a preview of what God will say.

Elihu has all the marks of an impetuous youth with high ideals and limited patience. He becomes angry with Job and the friends as a result of their unresolved debate. Until now, he had waited to speak out of respect for the others’ age (*32:4*), but he can wait no longer. Picture him throughout the earlier dialogue, standing at the edge of the friends’ conversation with Job, shifting impatiently from foot to foot, clenching his fists as he tries to keep silent.

Because of Elihu’s passion, most scholars interpret his character as young and hot-headed, full of opinions and full of himself. For this reason, many commentators dismiss Elihu’s speech as bombastic nonsense. For example, he takes twenty-four verses (*32:6–34:9*) to say they had their chance, now it’s his turn.

This does an injustice to Elihu, however. True, his character is young, yet his passion breathes new life into the discussion. One senses that he cares far more deeply—and on a much more personal level—about helping Job find understanding than the three older men. Indeed, his emotion matches Job’s own.

*“My heart is indeed like wine that has no vent;  
like new wineskins, it is ready to burst.  
I must speak, so that I may find relief;  
I must open my lips and answer.” (32:19–20)*

At last Job has a responder who is as intimately engaged in the discussion as he is!

**WE ARE NOT ALONE** Despite Elihu’s reputation, this character has something of value to say. In his speeches, for the first time in the *book of Job*, is a passionate, heartfelt defense of the living God who cares intimately for the created. Elihu makes three basic points:

1. God is greater than mortals
2. Mortals, not God, are prone to sin
3. God does treat people fairly, although, as James Crenshaw says in *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction*, God sometimes “uses suffering to instruct people in the way they should walk, and overlooks sin to allow time for repentance” (p. 112, see For Further Reading).

Elihu acknowledges Job’s distress and his sense of alienation from God, yet he maintains that God is present nonetheless. Moreover, God continues to try to communicate with mortals:

*“Why do you contend against him,  
saying, ‘He will answer none of my words’?  
For God speaks in one way,  
and in two, though people do not perceive it.” (33:13–14)*

God speaks in dreams (33:15–18), through pain (*vs.* 19–25), and through others who have experienced God’s deliverance:

*“That person sings to others and says,  
‘I sinned, and perverted what was right,  
and it was not paid back to me.  
He has redeemed my soul from going down to the Pit,  
and my life shall see the light.’” (33:27–28)*

The heart of Elihu’s message is this: God seeks to be in relationship with us and will go to any lengths to establish that relationship. God acts consistently to bring people back into relationship with their Creator.

*“God indeed does all these things,  
twice, three times, with mortals,  
to bring back their souls from the Pit,  
so that they may see the light of life.” (33:29–30)*

If Job feels God has deserted him, then Job is being short-sighted. True, in many ways, God is too great for mortal comprehension and can never be known in entirety.



- 1 How would you describe Elihu as a person? Do you know anyone like him?
- 2 When has a young person provided you with wisdom?

PIT: see p. 18

- 1 Have you ever felt deserted by God? If so, what were the circumstances? What helped you recover a sense of God's presence?
- 2 What are ways that God communicates with you? With your church?



*“Out of the north comes golden splendor;  
around God is awesome majesty.  
The Almighty—we cannot find him;  
he is great in power and justice,  
and abundant righteousness he will not violate.  
Therefore mortals fear him;  
he does not regard any who are wise in their own conceit.”  
(37:22–24)*

At the same time, just because Job does not sense God's presence, it doesn't mean that God is absent.

If we couple this speech with Elihu's earlier ones, then a picture begins to emerge: We do not always feel God's presence, even when we want to, because of our human limitations. Nevertheless, God is continually reaching through the divine majesty to establish a connection with us. If Elihu had been aware of modern technology, he might have compared this to a telephone call in which one person hears a clear voice, but the other hears only static. God is there, listening to us and trying to communicate, even if we cannot sense anyone on the other end of the line.

**JOB'S SIN** Elihu's speech also raises a critical implication for Job. God “does not regard any who are wise in their own conceit” (37:24). Does this statement apply to Job? Elihu thinks so, in the sense that Job is trying to “box in” God; Job is limiting God by refusing to acknowledge God's full nature.

God is consistent, Elihu proclaims. God must be God. Any theological system that denies this is inadequate. Job has accused God of acting hatefully or maliciously, but this is not God's nature.

*“Of a truth, God will not do wickedly,  
and the Almighty will not pervert justice.” (34:12)*

For Elihu, failing to acknowledge God's nature is a sort of sin on Job's part. Therefore, Job is not fully innocent, as he claims.

*“You say, ‘I am clean, without transgression;  
I am pure, and there is no iniquity in me.  
Look, he finds occasions against me,  
he counts me as his enemy;  
he puts my feet in the stocks,  
and watches all my paths.’  
But in this you are not right. I will answer you:  
God is greater than any mortal.” (33:9–12)*

Moreover:

*“Job has said, ‘I am innocent,  
and God has taken away my right;  
in spite of being right I am counted a liar;  
my wound is incurable, though I am without transgression.’  
Who is there like Job,  
who drinks up scoffing like water,  
who goes in company with evildoers  
and walks with the wicked?  
For he has said, ‘It profits one nothing  
to take delight in God.’ ” (34:5–9)*

Thus Elihu condemns Job for belittling God:

*“Those who have sense will say to me,  
and the wise who hear me will say,  
‘Job speaks without knowledge,  
his words are without insight.’  
Would that Job were tried to the limit,  
because his answers are those of the wicked.  
For he adds rebellion to his sin;  
he claps his hands among us,  
and multiplies his words against God.” (vs. 34–37)*

**LOOK FIRST TO GOD** Elihu has been concerned all along with defending God to the others. Look again at what kindled his anger in the first place. *Job 32:2* says he became angry with Job “because he justified himself rather than God.” Likewise, according to one ancient tradition, *v. 3* says he was angry at the friends because they “had put God in the wrong.”

Elihu implies that Job and the friends are asking the wrong questions, based on faulty perspectives. Rather than asking, “Why is this happening to Job?,” they should ask, “What do I know about God and what God is like?” If they focus on God and not Job, Elihu hints, they will be on the track to true wisdom. To Elihu, this is far more helpful than arguing over various theological systems and whether they work.

In the end, Elihu is the only one who is genuinely concerned with maintaining God’s name and reputation. The friends and Job have each praised God at some point and spoken of God’s majesty, but the friends wanted to justify their tradition and Job wanted to justify himself. Their ultimate aim was never to justify or defend God. They were more concerned with “boxing in” God—either to the system of retribution or to the image of a malicious deity—than with acknowledging that God “will not do wickedly” (*34:12*).

At one level, Elihu’s answer, lofty as it is, is still unsatisfactory. Our inclination, like Job’s, is to keep asking, “But why?” Elihu steers us away from that question and its focus on the events in human life to consideration of the very nature of God.

- 1 Do you agree with Elihu that Job is at fault in some way? Why?
- 2 Why do you think Elihu defends God so passionately?

*Like Job’s wife’s curse (2:9);  
a well-meaning scribe  
probably changed the wording  
(see p. 9).*

**RETRIBUTION:** see p. 19

- 1 Have you ever defended God to someone? If so, what happened?
- 2 How do you feel about Elihu’s response to Job? Is it helpful?

## CLOSING

A truism is that “God moves in mysterious ways.” Once we accept that some parts of life will remain a mystery because God is beyond our understanding, a new level of peaceful trust emerges.



## PRAYER

*O LORD, my heart is not lifted up,  
my eyes are not raised too high;  
I do not occupy myself with things  
too great and too marvelous for me.  
But I have calmed and quieted my soul,  
like a weaned child with its mother;  
my soul is like the weaned child that is with me.*

*O Israel, hope in the LORD  
from this time on and forevermore. Amen.*

—Ps. 131



# JOB

## OUT OF THE WHIRLWIND

One maxim says, “Be careful what you ask for; you may get it.” Job is certainly a good example of this. From the start, he has demanded a confrontation with God. Now, at last, God is present, and the encounter is not at all what Job expected!

**CONFRONTED BY GOD** God speaks to Job from a frightening whirlwind (38:1)—automatically setting Job at a disadvantage! Hebrew scriptures often show God addressing human beings from this visible sign of force, in order to emphasize God’s “otherness” and power.

Here, God confronts Job and dares him to follow through with his original challenge.

*“Gird up your loins like a man,  
I will question you, and you shall declare to me.” (38:3)*

Suddenly, instantly, the tables are turned. Job has wanted to find God in order to interrogate the Creator; clearly, however, God will ask the questions and Job will have to answer. This is not exactly what Job had planned; he intended to confront God as to the cause of his sufferings, but instead God will confront Job with the limits of his knowledge and understanding.

God begins by questioning Job:

*“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?  
Tell me, if you have understanding.*

*Who determined its measurements—surely you know!*

*Or who stretched the line upon it?*

*On what were its bases sunk,*

*or who laid its cornerstone*

*when the morning stars sang together*

*and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?” (38:4-7)*

Throughout the speech on creation (38:1—40:2), humans are never mentioned. This seems to be deliberate: God wants to show Job that the universe can exist quite well without him.

This first speech clearly shows the limits of Job’s power and authority, and demonstrates the vast difference between Job and God. As Bible scholar James Crenshaw says in his book *Old Testament Wisdom* (cited on p. 32):

In truth [Job] cannot perform midwife service at the birth of the sea, dispense dew and rain, send the sources of light on their respective journeys, provide food for wild animals, or control the instincts of creatures like hawks and vultures.

### LESSON 8

442  
38:4-7; 40:1-5 443

#### KEY IDEA

God does not answer Job’s question, “Why me?” but gives assurance of presence in suffering and strength to endure.

**WHIRLWIND:** A violent storm, not necessarily a tornado, signifying the presence of God, e.g.: Ps. 18:7-15; Ez. 1:4

1 In the space below, make a list of images of God found in 38:1—40:2.

Creator  
 maintainer  
 all-powerful

2 What does nature teach you about God?

**LEVIATHAN:** A large, usually formidable, sea monster; see Ps. 74:13, 104:26;

Is. 27:1

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**CHAOS:** Unorganized primordial matter, often described as watery; see Gen. 1:2

Lacking the ability to perform a single act which God isolates for his consideration, Job reluctantly admits that he cannot rule the universe (pp. 110–111).

No wonder Job has little to say in response to God (40:4–5)!



**CAN YOU BE GOD?** In spite of his place as God's creature, Job has chosen to accuse God of unjust behavior. God's reaction is almost one of disbelief at this:

*"Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty?  
 Anyone who argues with God must respond."* (40:2)

God rebukes Job for the way he has reacted to his life situation. Specifically, Job is called to task for interpreting events in such a way as to put God on trial. Job has (1) accused God of perverting justice and (2) implied God must plead guilty to this in order for Job to be justified. From God's point of view, Job should know better: Job should realize that the holy God never acts unjustly, no matter how the situation appears. In a way, God is saying, "Come on, Job. Have a little faith in me."

The heart of the matter is this: Job has been willing to sacrifice God's name in order to justify his own. Surprisingly, God says, in essence, "It's OK with me, as long as you can back it up." If Job can take on God's role as cosmic ruler, and manage the world better than God does, then God will acknowledge Job's victory.

*"Deck yourself with majesty and dignity;  
 clothe yourself with glory and splendor.  
 Pour out the overflowings of your anger,  
 and look on all who are proud, and abase them.  
 Look on all who are proud, and bring them low;  
 tread down the wicked where they stand.  
 Hide them all in the dust together;  
 bind their faces in the world below.  
 Then I will also acknowledge to you  
 that your own right hand can give you victory."* (40:10–14)

Not only must Job remove the wicked from the earth, he must defeat the leviathan:

*"Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook,  
 or press down its tongue with a cord?  
 Can you put a rope in its nose,  
 or pierce its jaw with a hook?  
 Will it make many supplications to you?  
 Will it speak soft words to you?  
 Will it make a covenant with you to be taken as your servant  
 forever?  
 Will you play with it as with a bird,  
 or will you put it on leash for your girls?"* (41:1–5)

In the Hebrew worldview, the leviathan represented the ancient threat of chaos, a destructive force with the power to unmake everything. Chaos was thought to have existed at least as long as creation itself, if not longer, and it was often associat-

ed with the sea and its monsters. One particular theology of creation, found in several biblical texts, held that God is always in battle against chaos, always fighting to hold it back from destroying the world. The creation event did not end this struggle, rather it was just the beginning of the ongoing cosmic battle. Therefore, God challenges Job to prove he can keep chaos at bay before he claims heaven's throne.

God pushes Job to rethink his view of the Creator in light of one eternal truth: God is not limited by human ideas or perceptions. In this particular case, God is not bound by human understandings of justice. Indeed, when Job calls God's justice into question based on his own personal experiences, God answers, in essence, "To understand my justice, you must look beyond what has happened to you. The sum of my justice is not limited to your life—my justice is found in how I create and sustain all of life. What fault can you possibly find with me on that level?"

Based on this same reasoning, we see that Job's friends are wrong to equate justice with a strict system of divine reward and punishment. Rather, *chapters 38–41* maintain, God's justice is connected to **providence**, which includes the ways God both sustains creation and shapes human history.

Note that God does not answer Job's question of *why*, saying instead that God is above such questioning unless Job is somehow God's equal. Job's role is to look at God's nature, accept it, and offer praise—because accepting God's nature means accepting more is at work than we can see. There is justice, but it is God's justice, which may not make sense to human eyes.

**STRENGTH TO ENDURE** Confronted by God, which is what he wanted, Job has no answers and no defense: he reevaluates himself in light of God's holy majesty, and thereby gains a new understanding not possible without a face-to-face encounter with God.

This is not all that Job learns, however. Perhaps the greater lesson is that God, in all the divine majesty and terror, is present as Job had hoped. God addresses Job in order to set the record straight, but God is not concerned about which theological stance is the correct one, nor is God about to offer a divine defense to Job. Rather, God wants to correct a spiritual misconception held by Job and his friends. All believe Job was abandoned by God, even though they disagree as to why. This is the point God wants to argue. Job was never cut off from God: He can still experience the presence of God in the midst of suffering, even if he does not know the cause of his suffering.

For Christians, the question arises as to the connection between human suffering, divine presence, and the afterlife. What difference, if any, does it make that we can read the *book of Job* in light of Christian hope? Surely our belief in resurrection must affect, to some degree, the way in which we interpret Job's message and apply its meaning to our lives.

During the time Job's story was being developed and written, the Hebrews had various conceptions of an afterlife. Most believed one lived on through one's children and through one's good name, but that was all. Therefore, Job's suffering in this

**PROVIDENCE:** *God's foreknowledge, governance and ultimate plan for nature and humankind*

- 1 When have you underestimated or misjudged God?
- 2 *Job 38–41* suggests we look at God's providence in creation and history if we really want to understand God's justice. How does this compare with your own view of God's justice and how it operates?

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*Ancient peoples believed in Sheol, the place of the dead beneath the earth.*

*Paul's thorn in the flesh was most likely a physical disability, but, possibly, it was opposition to his preaching.*

- 1 What is your view of life after death? How does it relate to suffering in this life?
- 2 What insights do you gain from Paul's perspective on his experience, recorded in *2 Cor. 11—12* and 938 elsewhere? Write them down in the space below.

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world was all the more tragic; restoration had to be made before he died or the opportunity would be lost for all time.

Christians look forward to a future time when all wrongs will be made right and all sorrows will end. As Jesus told his disciples in a slightly different context.

When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you (*John 16:21–22*).

The promise of an afterlife does not negate the pain from tragedies in this world, although it does offer some comfort and hope. The pain we experience in the here-and-now is genuine, and it can lead us to feel as Job does. There is no shame in this. Belief in an afterlife may be cause for hope, but it offers no shield from, nor explanation of, human suffering. We still struggle with anger, hurt, and confusion when calamity strikes—and we are forced to keep seeking the answer to why such things happen. 938

The apostle Paul himself is proof of this. In *2 Cor. 11:23–29*, he describes his life as full of floggings, beatings, shipwrecks, and other dangers. He speaks of sleepless nights and of being hungry and cold. In addition to this, he also mentions the constant pressure of his anxiety over the churches in his care. Perhaps Paul's greatest source of suffering, however, was the "thorn . . . in the flesh" (*12:7*), from which he prayed to be delivered. No, belief in an afterlife does not make this life easier—for Paul or for us.

Our true comfort is the same as that discovered by Job: God is with us in the midst of suffering, and God grants us the strength to endure. We do not have to wait until the afterlife to have God's healing, supportive presence; God is with us now.

**CLOSING**

No one knew better than the apostle Paul that God upholds believers with continual strength and support. In a moving testimony to God's presence in his life, Paul wrote:

But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.

—*2 Cor. 4:7–9*

**PRAYER**

*Almighty God, we acknowledge that endurance, like hope, comes from your power, not our own. For this, we humbly offer our thanks and praise. Amen.*



# JOB

## A PERSISTENT FAITH

### LESSON 9

42:1-6, 10-17

#### KEY IDEA

Job's story teaches us about faith; even when we do not understand our blessings or our suffering, we can trust God's steadfast love and care.

**ASHES:** *A symbol of destruction (Ez. 28:18); by extension, repentance*

- 1 When has an encounter with God changed your perspective toward God? Toward yourself? Toward someone else?
- 2 Where do you see God at work in your life?

This session brings the end of Job's story. Here is Job's response to God's majestic speech and God's response to Job's faithfulness. *Chapter 42* is only seventeen verses long, but it holds a wealth of meaning for people of faith.

**NEW PERSPECTIVES** The first six verses show a radical change in Job. He has been touched to the core by his encounter with God, and he will never be the same. Before, Job's sole truth was his own innocence and, by implication, God's guilt. Now he realizes that he didn't know what he was talking about.

Job has now met God one-on-one. He will never again doubt God's justice or forget God's majesty, because

*"I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,  
but now my eye sees you" (v. 5).*

Then Job makes an odd statement:

*"Therefore I despise myself,  
and repent in dust and ashes" (v. 6).*

This is misleading in English because it sounds as if Job is retracting his previous claims to innocence. Rather, the original Hebrew indicates that Job is apologizing to God for the wrongful statements he made out of ignorance of the divine nature. Essentially, Job is saying, "I still can't see I ever committed a sin like the others said; but I do see now I said some pretty off-base things about you. I was wrong, and I take back what I said!"

Job has gained a new perspective on God as a result of their encounter. This does not invalidate Job's previous experience; it shows that the basic perspective needed to accurately interpret God's role in life events comes only through engagement with God.

In addition, Job gains a new perspective on himself. He has seen himself as totally righteous and so, in a sense, as God's equal. In a backhanded way, therefore, he is guilty of pride. Now he truly sees God as God is, and this leads Job to see himself as he truly is. He may be innocent, but he is not holy or almighty. Thus, Job repents of his arrogance.

Job's new self-perception is underscored by the phrase "dust and ashes" (v. 6). This phrase was used by the Hebrews to describe the main components of the human body, so it shows Job's renewed awareness of his own mortality and limitations, especially as compared to God's immortality and power.

**JOB ON TRIAL** At one point, Job longed for a courtroom in which he could plead his case (13:3, 18). What would the verdict be if we were to place Job on trial as he wanted? Is he somehow guilty, as the three friends and Elihu claim, or is he innocent, as Job himself insists?

On one hand, Job, by his own admission, has jumped to conclusions without full knowledge of the issue. He has made assumptions about God that now, thanks to a more direct experience of the divine presence, he recognizes as unfounded.

*“I know that you can do all things,  
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.  
‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’  
Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,  
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.” (42:2–3)*

On the other hand, Job truly is innocent in that he committed no actual wrongdoing. He did follow all the rules for righteous living, and he worked overtime to stay right with God. He tells the truth about that and subsequently fights to maintain his integrity.

If any aspect might tip the balance in Job’s favor, it is his faithfulness: Job in the poem, like the Job in the prose story, remains faithful despite his distress. Job laments, complains, and offers challenges to God, yet he never denounces God. Job blames God for his tragedy and accuses God of seeking more ways to be cruel to an innocent victim, but Job never turns his back on God or seeks to end the relationship. On the contrary, Job continues to seek God and to seek an explanation for why all this has happened. For what reason? Job intends to set the record straight and restore his relationship with God to what he thinks it had been.

Job is a model of persistent faithfulness because he never gives up his struggle for right relationship with God. He may misunderstand God for awhile, but ultimately he keeps pushing to restore harmony. Job is wrong to think poorly of God, yet he is to be praised for his spiritual stubbornness.

In the end, the relationship that God establishes with Job is richer because of what Job has been through. Job knew about God before his troubles began, but now he has talked with God directly. The direct encounter with God fills Job with what he most desires—a sense of the intimate, personal companionship of the Almighty. Before, Job felt his relationship with God was unstrained, but now he feels it is actually close. Given this, the story seems to say, isn’t Job’s guilt or innocence irrelevant?

**A HAPPY ENDING?** In 42:7 the prose narrative of chapters 1–2, which has been interrupted by the insertion of the poetical chapters, resumes (3–42:6). Verses 7–9 throw us back into the prose story a bit abruptly, in fact. Here, God is angry with the three friends for not speaking “what is right” of God, as Job had done. (As in chapters 1–2, Elihu is not mentioned.) What did the friends say in the original prose story that made God so upset? No one knows; that part of the narrative is lost.

At any rate, poor Job, whom the friends came to comfort, now

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- 1 Stage a mock trial with judge, jury, and Job in the dock. With what is he charged? Do you find him guilty or innocent? Why?
  - 2 How can suffering bring us closer to God?

*Faithful person: see pp. 5, 12*

- 1 What does the end of the story say to you? What lessons do you find there for yourself?
- 2 What can you do to improve the purity of your own faith? Write down your answer in the space below.

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is called to pray for the friends. They had hoped to console him during his time of “separation” from God, but instead Job is the one bringing them back into relationship with the Holy One!

After Job prays for the friends, a happy ending is recorded:

And the LORD restored the fortunes of Job when he had prayed for his friends; and the LORD gave Job twice as much as he had before. . . . The LORD blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning; and he had 14,000 sheep, 6,000 camels, 1,000 yoke of oxen, and 1,000 donkeys. He also had seven sons and three daughters. . . . After this Job lived 140 years, and saw his children, and his children’s children, four generations. And Job died, old and full of days (42:10, 12–13, 16–17).

People have mixed reactions to this ending. The original audience heard a happy tale in which a faithful person was abundantly rewarded. Modern readers tend to personalize Job more, so have trouble with such a simple ending to a complex story.

For many, the ending is ultimately unsatisfactory. James L. Crenshaw, author of *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction*, has argued the prose story presents a difficult image of God: If we take the prose account at face value, God callously destroys people and animals, and then, “this guilty Lord ties all loose ends together neatly, totally oblivious to the misery he has caused (p. 104).” The ending treats Job as if all his grief over his former children and servants magically disappears with his new circumstances.

Certainly the ending does not answer the question of why bad things happen to innocent people. We are still left to wonder: Why did Job have to suffer so much? Why did the children and servants have to die? What about justice for them? How can a “good” God allow (or cause) these things?

Within the context of the added poetry sections, however, the ending affirms that we can trust God to be in control; we can trust God to be loving and just; we can trust God to be present with us in the midst of suffering. We can trust that all things will work for good. By the end of the book as we have it, Job learns there is more to creation, justice, and divine rule than he can ever understand. He also learns that humans are not the center of the universe, that retribution is not the same as justice, and that God does indeed act to sustain life.

Also note that the prose story underwent a subtle change over time. Originally, its purpose was to identify divine testing as the cause for human suffering. The narrative encouraged people to be strong during times of testing, so, they too might be vindicated one day. Later, however, the emphasis shifted to a consideration of true piety. Real faithfulness, the story maintains, is found where no ulterior motive exists—in other words, when one has no wealth, blessings, or other valued treasures to protect. Honor given to God as a bribe to maintain such things is actually dishonor. Thus, the story challenged the Hebrew people to examine their spiritual lives for any improper motives and to take seriously God’s place in their hearts.



**FAITH FOR THE FUTURE** Job's faithfulness has persisted in the past, but it also persists into the future. Much has been made of the way in which God restores Job's fortune in *chapter 42*, yet think how hard this must have been for Job. These new blessings required an act of faith on Job's part almost as powerful as that demanded by his suffering.

Those of us who have experienced a great loss know how hard it can be to trust again—whether in oneself, in others, or in general circumstances. Someone who survived the Great Depression of the 1930s, for example, may find it difficult to have enough material security, while someone who has been “burned” by an unscrupulous coworker may have trouble becoming close to a new colleague. After such times, it is hard not to be cautious; indeed, it takes courage to risk another disappointment or loss.

Job teaches us about facing tragedy—and life—with faith. By accepting God's new blessings of children and prosperity, Job is again making himself vulnerable to loss. Rather than focusing on past events, Job embraces the future with faith in God's providence and care.

Once Job genuinely encounters God, his perspective shifts at a fundamental level. Job now acknowledges that, despite his best efforts, he will never understand some things. Human misery is one of them. At the same time, at least one misunderstanding on Job's part has been corrected as a result of new insight: he now knows that God is indeed with him—and will continue to be with him—in the midst of both suffering and blessing. This gives Job the strength to go on. It can do so for us too.

- 1 What events in your past make it difficult for you to trust the future? How does this affect your faith in God?
- 2 What difference does it make that Job encountered God before restitution was made, rather than after?
- 3 How is Job a model of faith that persists when understanding fails? What insights does this provide into your own spiritual life? In the life of the congregation and denomination of which you are a part?



## CLOSING

Ultimately, Job's story is about perseverance, faith, and hope. For Christians these qualities are intimately connected with God's victory in Jesus Christ. *First Peter* celebrates this basic truth.

Blessed be God, the Father of our Sovereign Jesus Christ! By God's great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.

—1:3–4; 5:10–11,  
*An Inclusive-Language Lectionary*

## PRAYER

*Thanks be to you,  
O God,  
for giving us the victory  
through Jesus Christ,  
our Lord.  
Amen.*

