

LOOKING FOR GOD

A Reader's Guide to the Book of Job

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INTRODUCTION

WHY IS IT GOOD TO READ THE BOOK OF JOB?

The Book of Job is about a man who goes through intense suffering.

We know that there is much suffering in the community today. There are physical and mental illnesses, and road accidents; there is marriage breakdown and domestic violence; there is abortion, and child abuse; there is stress, and coping with change; there are the difficulties of unemployment, poverty, and the debilitating aspects of welfare dependency; there is drug abuse, and crime; there is death and its aftermath. To say nothing of the ethnic strife and war that has plagued our times. It is good to know that the Bible is fully aware of human suffering, and leaves none of its depths untouched. It is worth knowing what the Bible has to say about suffering—and the Book of Job is a good place to go.

The church also is no less affected by suffering. There are many hurting people in the church, and the church itself suffers from demoralisation, clergy stress, pressures on families, and financial shortages. In every church there are those going through some kind of trauma, or those who have been through trauma, with its mark still left on their lives, and there are people living in difficult situations. If we do not know what the Bible has to say on the subject, we would certainly be helped by knowing it.

In each of our own personal lives, it may be that we are experiencing, or may have experienced, some kind of suffering. In 1993, my wife and I had a very nasty road accident, where the car was wrecked and we could have been killed, but we were mercifully spared from lasting injury. It was good for us to know the kingdom, or sovereign ruling, of God in that situation—that every bit of what happened to us there was part of the action of God in His unrelenting love, in all that He is doing in His kingdom and in His universe. Perhaps something of that will come through to us as we read the Book of Job.

Once we have read it, however, we may find that it is not so much about suffering as it is about God, and how knowing God leaves the matter of suffering far behind. That is why we have called this Guide *Looking for God*. In all his sufferings, this was the one thing Job was determined to be doing, in a way none of the others in the Book were.

The first purpose of this Guide is to get us to read the Book of Job. Have we ever done that? Right through? I suggest we do that now, before we start. Really, there is nothing I can add to what it says. My job is simply to present to you what the Scripture says, from a position of one who seeks to live within the Scriptures—as one who has received what the Bible says, and is living under it and in it, and is passing it on to others. I am not the only one who can do that—it would be good for us all to be like that. So I encourage us to read the Book of Job for ourselves, preferably more than once. Read it right through to get the overall picture of what is happening, and how it is set out. In this guide we will be taking sections of it in a different order from how they occur in the Book. Then, when we have finished, we will need to read it

again, to get the whole sweep of it, so that it enters into our soul, and becomes a part of us, and our life is related to what happens in the Book of Job.

HOW ARE WE TO READ THE BOOK OF JOB?

How are we to read any of the Scriptures? If we are just looking for information, or answers to philosophical questions, then we are likely to be disappointed. There is plenty of information, and there are plenty of answers, in the Bible. But that is not why we go to the Word of God. Some may approach the Book of Job, and many have done so, as a treatise on the problem of suffering and evil, as a philosophical problem: Why do good people suffer? Why do evil people go unpunished? These are important questions, and we are tempted to do that ourselves—to treat the Book of Job in that way and so engage in hefty intellectual debate over the problems of evil and suffering. We must resist that temptation. I might be tempted to read up all the commentaries on the Book of Job, and then myself make the final pronouncement on what it actually says on this topic. That temptation is not hard for me to resist, because I have not read all the commentaries on the Book of Job, and so I cannot yet give you the final pronouncement on what it says! It is interesting that when we start to read the commentaries that have been written on the Book of Job, many of them end up being diametrically opposed to each other! So that way may not get us very far.

The Book of Job, like the rest of the Bible, is not an information handbook or a philosophical treatise. What is it, then? It is part of the Word of God to us. And, like the rest of the Word of God, it is not a book about God, but an encounter with God Himself. It is a revelation of God. It is God revealing Himself. And to receive a revelation, we have to be in that revelation. An encounter with someone is not something you can ever be detached from. It is like falling in love with someone—this is not something we can stand back from and observe as an interesting phenomenon! It is something that happens to you, and you are a part of it: here is this person—how wonderful to be with him or her, and to be part of this relationship! So it is in an encounter with God.

So our ability to understand the Book of Job will not depend on the strength of our intellect, but on the state of our heart. I heard of a young girl, about ten years old, whose mother died of cancer. All the family were naturally upset. This little girl went off to her room, and stayed there for a long time. She came out very much at peace—she had taken into her room her Good News Bible, and had read through the Book of Job, and had understood every word, and it had been a great comfort to her.

Another case, more sobering perhaps: I heard of a person who had read the Book of Job at some time of trouble, and had understood it at the time, but once the trouble was over could not remember what the Book of Job meant, and on re-reading it could not make any sense of it at all. So it seems that we can have a certain state of heart that enables us to encounter God in a time of trouble and receive revelation at that time, but we can then lose or go back on that, or perhaps come to think that we do not need God as much once our troubles are over, and so the Scriptures correspondingly come to mean little to us. For the time being, the meaning is obscured from us—hidden from us by God Himself—until we discover our need once more.

Would God do that? Why would God hide from us something of what is in his Word? Because He knows we need it so much. If we do not want it, He will withhold it, and expose us to the dread consequences of that, to bring us to a place where we know we cannot live without it. If we do not want to receive it, God will make it so

that we get into a position where we cannot *not* receive it. That is the way the whole Bible works. Jesus said the same about his parables. He told his parables so that everyone could understand (Mark 4:33)—everybody likes stories—but he said that if your heart is hard, if you do not have ‘ears to hear’, then the parable will withhold its meaning from you (Mark 4:11–12).

That could happen to us. Let us pray that the Book of Job will not be obscured for us, but that our hearts will be humble and open to receive the revelation, the encounter with God, in His word.

DATE AND AUTHORSHIP

We do not know when the Book of Job was written, or who wrote it. About all we can say is that it was part of the sacred literature of ancient Israel from well before the time of Christ. There has been much theory and speculation as to when and who and why, but we will not go into any of that here. We may read it up in the various commentaries if we are interested. Our concern is with what the book of Job actually says.

So let us begin to read it!

One

THE MAN JOB

1:1 There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.

We begin to meet this very interesting man called Job (pronunciation: rhymes with 'probe'). Job lived in the land of Uz, wherever that might be—perhaps somewhere east or north-east of Israel. Although Job appears in the Hebrew Scriptures, Job himself is not an Israelite. He is one to whom God revealed Himself outside of Israel.

BLAMELESS AND UPRIGHT

Job was 'blameless and upright', and he was 'one who feared God and turned away from evil'. Note the order in which these occur. Being 'blameless and upright' comes before being 'one who feared God and turned away from evil'. How does a person get to be 'blameless and upright'? We might say, 'By always doing right and never doing wrong'. But who has ever done that?¹ Only one,² and it was not Job. Job later freely admits that he has sinned (see 7:20–21; 10:15; 13:26; 19:4). Yet Job is 'blameless and upright'. This is not just the opinion of the writer of this book. Twice God Himself declares Job to be 'a blameless and upright man' (1:8; 2:3). How did Job come to be that way? The only way the Bible knows that to be possible is by being forgiven and justified by God Himself, as we come into a faith-relationship with God (see Genesis 15:6; Isaiah 26:2; Habakkuk 2:4; Romans 1:16–17; 3:23–26). We will see that Job was a justified sinner, in a faith-relationship with God that was all-important to him.

Fear of God follows from being forgiven by God: 'with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared' (Psalm 130:4 *NIV*). What does it mean when the Bible says we 'fear God'? It does not mean we are dead scared of Him—though there is an element of that! It means that we consider that God is real, that He is true to Himself, and that He means business, and that we are in relationship with God, and so that makes a difference to how we conduct our lives. It certainly made a difference to Job. We are told that in his fear of God he turned away from evil.

Those who do not fear God in this way are likely not to care so much how they live. Where there is 'no fear of God' (Genesis 20:11), people live as if they did not care about the consequences—as if God would not do anything to judge them if they lived evil or immoral lives. Job feared God: he respected the truth that God is concerned about good and evil. Job knew that he was answerable to God, and that God was capable of acting in judgement. Job knew the goodness of God, and how good it is to live in keeping with that goodness of God.

RICHLY BLESSED BY GOD

Job was a man mightily blessed:

¹ The wise king Solomon said: 'there is no one who does not sin' (1 Kings 8:46).

² The apostle John, who knew Jesus as well as anyone, said of Jesus: 'in him there is no sin' (1 John 3:5).

1:2 There were born to him seven sons and three daughters. 3 He had seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and very many servants; so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east.

Job had seven sons and three daughters—ten children altogether, a great family. Not only that, he also had 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, 500 donkeys, and very many servants, so that he was the greatest—that is, the richest, the wealthiest, the most well-off—of all the people of the east. He was richly blessed by God. All of these things are a gift from God—our children, our possessions, and the responsibilities that we have. But there is always a temptation when we are richly blessed to become self-sufficient and secure, trusting in all of that, saying, ‘Well, I’m set up now—I’m right!’ How many of us spend all our lives just trying to get to a position of wealth and security? Job was already there. But that did not mean that he then renounced his faith in God. He saw all these things as a gift from God, and his faith in God remained strong.

JOB AND HIS FAMILY

We now hear something of Job’s family story:

1:4 His sons used to go and hold feasts in one another's houses in turn; and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. 5 And when the feast days had run their course, Job would send and sanctify them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all; for Job said, ‘It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts.’ This is what Job always did.

Job’s concern in this relationship with God was not just with himself, but it extended also to his family—he was a fine father of his children. He had seven sons, and every year each of his sons on his special day, whatever that might have been—perhaps his birthday—would invite the rest of the family, particularly remembering to include the three sisters—all would come along, and they would have a feast. It would go for several days—they knew how to have feasts in those days! Then at the end of the time, Job would send and ‘sanctify’ them. That is, he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings, according to the number of them all, so that each of them had a burnt offering to God. For Job said, ‘It may be that my sons have sinned and cursed God in their hearts’—you can get a bit lax, perhaps, after several days of eating and drinking. Job thought: We will make sure that as a family we are right with God, and if anything has been amiss, we will see that it is forgiven and put right according to the way God has set out—through sacrifice. And so he prayed for his family, and he cared for them in that way, for their relationship with God. Thus Job did continually.

JOB AND THE FRIENDSHIP OF GOD

It would be good now to turn to Chapter 29. This gives us another insight into Job and into his character before the sufferings came upon him. These words were spoken while he was in his sufferings, but thinking back to the time before.

29:1 Job again took up his discourse and said:
2 ‘Oh, that I were as in the months of old,
as in the days when God watched over me;
3 when his lamp shone over my head,

and by his light I walked through darkness;
4 when I was in my prime,
 when the friendship of God was upon my tent;
5 when the Almighty was still with me,
 when my children were around me;
6 when my steps were washed with milk,
 and the rock poured out for me streams of oil!
7 When I went out to the gate of the city,
 when I took my seat in the square,
8 the young men saw me and withdrew,
 and the aged rose up and stood;
9 the nobles refrained from talking,
 and laid their hands on their mouths;
10 the voices of princes were hushed,
 and their tongues stuck to the roof of their mouths.
11 When the ear heard, it commended me,
 and when the eye saw, it approved;
12 because I delivered the poor who cried,
 and the orphan who had no helper.
13 The blessing of the wretched came upon me,
 and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy.
14 I put on righteousness, and it clothed me;
 my justice was like a robe and a turban.
15 I was eyes to the blind,
 and feet to the lame.
16 I was a father to the needy,
 and I championed the cause of the stranger.
17 I broke the fangs of the unrighteous,
 and made them drop their prey from their teeth.
18 Then I thought, 'I shall die in my nest,
 and I shall multiply my days like the phoenix;
19 my roots spread out to the waters,
 with the dew all night on my branches;
20 my glory was fresh with me,
 and my bow ever new in my hand.

21 'They listened to me, and waited,
 and kept silence for my counsel.
22 After I spoke they did not speak again,
 and my word dropped upon them like dew.
23 They waited for me as for the rain;
 they opened their mouths as for the spring rain.
24 I smiled on them when they had no confidence;
 and the light of my countenance they did not extinguish.
25 I chose their way, and sat as chief,
 and I lived like a king among his troops,
 like one who comforts mourners.'

What a wonderful picture of a great man! Job here is not blowing his own trumpet. He is not trying to build himself up. We are going to see that Job is a very direct, honest, and straightforward person, who sees what is, and says it as it is. So he is not boasting here. He is simply saying what his situation was before his suffering came. Let us look at some of those things.

He is very conscious in those days of God watching over him—God's lamp shining on his head—and that he walked his life by the light of God, by the guidance of God through the darkness. His whole life was trustful towards God.

By the time this book opens he is not a young man. He has already been in his prime—literally, his 'autumn days'. So he is a man of great maturity. Autumn for me, in Adelaide, South Australia, is the best time of the year: there are those lovely days that just go on and on, 'until they think warm days will never cease'—Keats's 'Ode to Autumn' is one of my favourite poems. A sense of maturity and richness and ripeness and fullness is there, that comes with autumn—that was Job. He was very conscious, in that time, of the friendship God had with him, of family closeness with God: 'the Almighty was with me . . . my children about me.' He would have said that with some wistfulness, because, as we shall see, by the time he said this, he had lost all his children.

'When my steps were washed with milk': what would it feel like to be walking through fresh creamy milk? A silky, smooth path, perhaps, with all things going well for you. Or it may just be a way of saying there was plenty of milk coming from the cows and goats—a sign of rich prosperity. As is also, 'the rock poured out for me streams of oil': referring not to oil from under the ground but to olive oil—meaning he had olive orchards which produced abundantly, and out of this rocky ground there were great harvests. This is poetic picture-language, as when the Bible refers to the promised land as 'a land flowing with milk and honey' (Exodus 3:8). He may have been speaking metaphorically of his own personal life at that time—that he experienced it as a time of rich blessing.

Then there was the position he held in the community. The 'gate of the city' was where the elders of the city sat. It was like the main city square, where the leaders of the community, the respected older men, would sit around together and consider all the matters that needed their attention, that were brought to them there. A combination what we call now the town hall, the law courts, and the centre of business and commerce, where matters of civic importance were decided, judgements were made, and policies were settled. When Job took up his rightful position in this setting, the younger men were very respectful, because of his experience and what he had to offer, and even the older people, the aged ones, rose and stood as a mark of respect for Job. A great man. The princes—the rulers—would refrain from talking and lay their hands on their mouths when Job was present: no one tried to shout Job down or pull rank on him. The nobles had nothing to say when Job was there. Rather, they would have said: Here is someone who has something to say, who knows what he is talking about, who is worth listening to, so let's be quiet and hear what he's got to say. Certainly there was no way they could criticise or find fault with him. No matter who they were—younger, older, rulers, nobles—this is what they would have said.

Then we hear some of the things that Job did—his good works in the community, for which he received great respect and approval. Not that that's why he did them—he was simply carrying out what is normal justice and care in the terms that God would have it. Though not of the people of Israel (he may have been an

Edomite, or of some other nation) he lived in keeping with the universal law of God with humanity that was to be given to Israel. He 'delivered the poor who cried': people who felt that they were hard done by would come to the city elders at the gate and present their case—'I have been ripped off by this rich merchant', or 'I have had my field stolen by some farmer'—and Job would always uphold the just cause of the poor. And the orphans, the people who had no one to stand up for them—he would become their family, and take up their cause. When people were on really hard times, 'about to perish', Job was willing to help them out from all that he had—and we have seen that he was very rich. The widow, who had no husband to care for her, with no social security, could be sure that, with someone like Job there, she would be looked after in the city.

'Righteousness . . . clothed me; my justice . . . like a robe and a turban': it wasn't something that Job came to from outside; it was the way he lived—Job's whole life was characterised by this justice, this righteousness of God. It was part and parcel of his being, in his conduct towards people, and to those in need.

'Blind . . . lame': there were no hospitals in those days: it was up to the community to care for those with sickness and disability—and that happened with Job. 'The cause of the stranger': Job did not just care for his friends, but even if it was someone he did not know or had never met before, he would go looking for those in need in order to make sure that they were helped. Where he came across unrighteousness, where stronger people were taking advantage of weaker people, he would change that situation: 'I broke the fangs of the unrighteous, and made him drop his prey from his teeth'—You get your hands off that poor widow: that is not just, what you are doing, and I will protect her from you.

This was Job's life at that time. So Job would have thought: This is wonderful—I've been richly blessed by God, I've been given a wonderful home, and a wonderful community, I have a wonderful life—and this is how I will be for the rest of my days. No doubt he had a right to think that. That is not how it turned out. But we sense the blessing that he felt at that time. Long days, roots spreading out to the waters, rich provision. Dew all night on the branches—always being kept fresh, and not getting tired. His glory (his innermost being) fresh within him, his bow ever ready, new in his hand, ready for the battle every morning—whatever was going to come up, Job could face it, and it would be good.

As we have heard, after Job had spoken in the assembly of the elders, there was nothing more to say—it had all been said. People who listened received his word, and it was a blessing to them. The kind of advice and knowledge of life that he had to share left people open-mouthed and looking for more, to drink it in. He had a way of bucking people up when their self-esteem was low. His attentions made a difference to them, and they never felt put down by him—he always had a smile and a word of strong encouragement for them. And so he had leadership in the community: he set directions, his presence was a commanding one, and he knew how to lift people securely out of the doldrums.

That was Job, and his position in the community. See the strength, sureness, depth and maturity of this man's faith in God, and the way that showed in his life, both through his prayer and religious practices and the concern he had for the members of his family to be right with God; and also in the way his goodness was manifested in the community: in his care for the poor, and in the qualities of leadership, counselling and wise advice that he gave and was looked to for. It is well for us to note this here before we begin, so that later we may not be hasty in our

judgement of this great man when he is under intense pressure, but may be sensible enough also to lay our hands on our mouths.

Job thought that he might continue to live in this way for the rest of his days. But that was not to be.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, we marvel that a human being can have such a relationship with You as we see Job having here: in friendship with You, as You watch over us, Your light shining on us as we walk with You by faith through the darkness, knowing and living in Your righteousness and justice. Thank you for Your gift of faith; thank You for Your mercy on us sinners: Your forgiveness and justification of us that is ours in Jesus Christ Your beloved Son. Thank You for Your great goodness and blessing that flows from that into us and into the lives of others, as we live again in the way You created us to be. Thank You for all that comes from Your hand: our families, our wealth and possessions, our belonging in community with each other. Yet, Father, should all these things be taken from us, may our delight and joy above all be in You, our Lord and our God, our Saviour and our Redeemer. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.