

Focal Text

Job 1:1; 1:6—2:10

Background

Job 1:1—2:10

Main Idea

Job's suffering was not what would have been expected to happen to a person who was righteous.

Question to Explore

Does righteous living provide insurance against bad things happening to us?

Study Aim

To summarize the story of Job and state implications for the questions it raises about suffering

Study and Action Emphases

- Affirm the Bible as our authoritative guide for life and ministry
- Develop a growing, vibrant faith

LESSON ONE

When Bad Things Happen to a Good Person

Quick Read

The popular religious view of Job's day that suffering was the result of sin forced this faithful man to rethink his faith when catastrophic events stripped him of possessions, family, friends, and health.



You see them almost every evening on the news. You recognize them by their hollow stares, unsmiling faces, and distended stomachs. They are starving children, some of them wandering refugees who are victims of wars they did not start. Others are sufferers of famines they could not control. That they should endure such horror while other children are enjoying a carefree childhood introduces us to one of the great, unanswered questions of life: *Why do good and innocent people suffer?* We can understand it when evil people experience the consequences of their wickedness, but how does one explain the suffering of good and godly people?

This question has engaged people of every generation since history has been recorded. This puzzling dilemma has caused many to reject a faith to live by. People ask, *How can you believe in God when there is so much suffering and sorrow in this world?* The story of Job is the story of every person who has struggled with what seems senseless suffering, or who has felt the agonizing pain of feeling separated from family, friends, and God.

Scripture is not unmindful of the issue raised by such questions. While this passage may not give us all the answers we desire, it does show us how one person found new insights and a faith that brought hope out of immense grief and pain.

Job 1:1, 6–22

¹There 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.

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⁶One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them. ⁷The LORD said to Satan, "Where have you come from?" Satan answered the LORD, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." ⁸The LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil." ⁹Then Satan answered the LORD, "Does Job fear God for nothing? ¹⁰Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. ¹¹But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face." ¹²The LORD said to Satan, "Very well, all that he has is in your power; only do not stretch out your hand against him!" So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD.

¹³One day when his sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in the eldest brother's house, ¹⁴a messenger came to Job and said, "The oxen were plowing and the donkeys were feeding beside them, ¹⁵and the Sabeans fell on them and carried them off, and killed the servants with the edge of the sword; I alone have escaped to tell you." ¹⁶While he was still speaking, another came and said, "The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants, and consumed them; I alone have escaped to tell you." ¹⁷While he was still speaking, another came and said, "The Chaldeans formed three columns, made a raid on the camels and carried them off, and killed the servants with the edge of the sword; I alone have escaped to tell you." ¹⁸While he was still speaking, another came and said, "Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother's house, ¹⁹and suddenly a great wind came across the desert, struck the four corners of the house, and it fell on the young people, and they are dead; I alone have escaped to tell you."

²⁰Then Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshiped. ²¹He said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD."

²²In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing.

Job 2:1–10

¹One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the LORD.

²The LORD said to Satan, "Where have you come from?" Satan answered the LORD, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." ³The LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason."

⁴Then Satan answered the LORD, "Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives. ⁵But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face." ⁶The LORD said to Satan, "Very well, he is in your power; only spare his life."

⁷So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD, and inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. ⁸Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes.

⁹Then his wife said to him, "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die." ¹⁰But he said to her, "You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

A Man Named Job (1:1)

Who was this man named “Job,” a name that has been ingrained in proverb and popular adages in our culture? In short, he is presented here in Job 1:1 as residing in “the land of Uz,” likely the biblical land of Edom, roughly between the Dead Sea and Arabia (see Lamentations 4:21). He was a person of wealth; he was religious; he was ethical in all his dealings; and he was deeply involved in caring for his family and his friends. His greatness was known throughout the region in which he lived.

Job is called “blameless and upright.” Being portrayed as “blameless” does not mean that he had no sin. We are all sinners, and Job was no

exception. The idea of “blameless” in Hebrew seems more to refer to completeness, to a well-rounded and balanced person, sound of body and mind, and reverent in spirit.

We can understand it when evil people experience the consequences of their wickedness, but how does one explain the suffering of good and godly people?

All of these attributes lead us to the initial issue of the Book of Job. Along with most of his contemporaries, Job assumed that if one prospered, it must surely be because of the blessing and reward of God for exemplary

living. Conversely, if one suffered, it must be punishment brought on by sin. Job’s experience would lead him to rethink this line of thought.

The Book of Job does not explore suffering merely through a theoretical or intellectual discourse. As so much of our Bible does, it examines the experience of a person whose beliefs were forged in the crucible of personal experience. All of Job’s beliefs about suffering had to be explored in the light of things that happened. For Job, the things that happened to him refused to fit into his neatly ordered theology and his understanding of the way things worked out in this world. Did Job find all the answers to his questions? Hardly! What Job did learn can be life-shaping realities for all of us.

Testing, Testing (1:6—2:10)

The scene shifts to a gathering of beings in the presence of the Almighty. Try reading this section to get the “big picture,” not spending too much time in the details of the scene. After all, when

Satan

The root of the word from which the term “Satan” is derived means to *obstruct or oppose*. If we focus only on Job 1—2, the Satan that we meet in this text is not portrayed as being particularly evil. In fact, he is included in the heavenly beings that have access to God. He is seen here as subordinate to God and must have the consent of God to pursue his testing of Job. Hebrew scholars point to the presence of the article *the* (*ha-satan*) in the Hebrew text. The use of the article suggests that the emphasis is on the role of one who is an *adversary*, rather than indicating a personal name.

Later Jewish and Christian thought would develop a more elaborate portrait of Satan, picturing Satan as evil and absolutely opposed to the way of God for humanity. The text in Job shows him as one who plods the earth, observing the ways of people. He is seen in the story as a prosecutor who sought to attack the credibility of a good and blameless man.

it comes to seeing heavenly things, we “see through a glass, darkly” (1 Corinthians 13:12, KJV). It is sufficient to say that here we are permitted access to this council of heavenly activity, giving us insights and information that Job lacked.

The primary characters in this heavenly gathering are God and *the Satan* (the form in the Hebrew), with an audience, variously translated as “sons of God” (1:6, NASB, KJV, RSV), “angels” (NIV), and “heavenly beings” (NRSV). These “heavenly beings” shared something of the nature of God and had access to God’s divine presence.

As the scene began, God pointed Satan to Job and asserted that there was no one like him on the earth (1:8). God asserted that Job had a rock-solid character that nothing could shake. Job was “a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil” (1:8).

Satan set the stage for all the rest of the book when he asked (1:9), “Does Job fear God for nothing?” He voiced a common criticism of many skeptics who believe that religious virtue is little more than a bargain with God, a seeking of divine blessing and favor in return for righteous living. The implication is clear. Take away that success, accumulated wealth, and power, and Job would crumble into a broken man, cursing his God and revealing his real nature.

The story of Job is the story of every person who has struggled with what seems senseless suffering, or who has felt the agonizing pain of feeling separated from family, friends, and God.

Satan's questions and comments reflected the popular theology of the day, in which righteousness brings plenty and sin results in punishment. The aim of Satan was clear. He could not defeat God's sovereignty over the universe, and so he sought to disrupt the relationship of God and humanity, alienating human beings from the loving and merciful relationship that God intends for God's people. This was evident in the Genesis account of the Fall (Genesis 3), and it is surely evident in the account of Job's experience.

Thus we are introduced to the first set of tests. The disastrous events that follow in the book are the plans of Satan, not God, as the following verses will demonstrate. Job and his friends believed that all that followed

was the hand of God. We, though, have been given a glimpse into the behind-the-scenes plot that Satan had concocted, a plot that Job and his friends could not see.

While this passage may not give us all the answers we desire, it does show us how one person found new insights and a faith that brought hope out of immense grief and pain.

What a series of disasters it was! Messengers came to Job with the word that he had lost his oxen and donkeys, along with all of his servants (Job 1:14–17). Hardly had those messengers finished their reports when yet another appeared with the news that all

of Job's sons and daughters were killed when a storm caused their house to collapse (1:18–19). Yet even through his grief and loss, Job worshiped God and affirmed his confidence in his Lord (1:20–21).

Not satisfied with this display of piety and steadfastness, Satan returned to the heavenly council with another challenge (2:1–6). His logic was that one might sustain the loss of possessions and even children and yet maintain a faithful trust in God. Surely, though, if added to those losses one suffered personal affliction and loathsome diseases, that would be a different matter. God's confidence in his servant, Job, remained strong, though, and off went Satan to unleash his pestilence on the unwitting Job (2:7).

The most disgusting of disease left Job languishing in the ashes of despair. Then his wife appears in the story. Surely Job could expect some comfort from his wife. One can only wonder how she had survived all of the losses to the family or how she herself escaped. But that is not the point here. In this moment of absolute suffering, Job was deprived even of the sympathy of his wife.

Augustine (354–430), perhaps the leading Christian thinker in the early centuries after the New Testament era, thought of Job's wife as an

Applying the Experience of Job

- Examine your experiences with suffering, particularly when you may have complained to God about the seeming unfairness of your suffering.
 - Remember that there will always be a gap between human and divine grasp of circumstances.
 - Recall the times when God has seemed nearest and when you have felt most certain of God's love.
 - Renew your commitment to this God of love and grace, drawing from the affirmations of faith expressed by Job.
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instrument of the devil, comparable to the role of Eve in the Genesis story, tempting her mate to forsake the Creator and follow the lead of Satan. Others have given her a more sympathetic treatment, feeling that she could not bear to see Job suffer for sins he would not confess. Her appeal to him was simply that he be relieved from this deceit and suffering by cursing God and entering death.

Job would not take such a lead, observing that if one receives good from God's hand, one must also accept reproach and suffering from the same God. Here we see that Job still held to the prevailing theological understanding of his time that all experiences, good and bad, are the result of God's justice.

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As we leave Job at the end of Job 2 we can only marvel at his resilience and faith. In spite of all that life had brought him, he still affirmed his confidence in his God, although he did not understand all that had happened. We may find ourselves wishing for the kind of affirmation that we find in 1:22: "In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing." However, as we shall see in future lessons in this series, this is not the end of the story.

Practical Insights from Job's Experience

What we believe as Christians is a result of many factors that have influenced our understanding. Family upbringing, influential teachers and

pastors, personal Bible study, and the suggestions of friends all contribute to our belief system. Many of those beliefs serve us well for a lifetime with seldom a serious challenge. On the other hand, we have accepted as truth some things that we are forced to rethink because of the reality of our experiences.

We have seen this to be the case with Job. Job was comfortable and unquestioning in his belief that sin and suffering were simple cause and effect. Then, when he himself experienced great suffering, he simply could not reconcile his belief with his experience of crushing losses in spite of his exemplary living. He was forced to struggle for the integrity of his theological foundations.

What practical conclusions can we draw from this opening prologue to the story of Job? This series of studies will lead us to additional conclusions, but consider these thoughts from this opening story of this “blameless” man.

Our faith is a lifelong journey through experiences that may well force us to test our cherished convictions.

The *first and foremost* issue is simply to remember that our faith is a journey, that it is not settled in one moment when we accept the invitation of our Lord to come and follow him. Our faith is a lifelong journey through experiences that may well force us to test our

cherished convictions. In such times, we gain new insights and understandings that are not secondhand ideas. They become the foundations for a growing and maturing faith.

Second, to be human and to live in this world with other people is to be exposed to suffering and pain. Whether you and I have had the same depth of suffering as Job experienced, we have or will have our times when we will suffer physical, mental, and spiritual pain.

Third, while all evil and sin have consequences, it is clear from this descriptive account that not all the suffering of this earth is the consequence of sin. Some suffering will remain for us a mystery.

Fourth, as we will see in lesson three, we can be sure that in the midst of crushing experiences and terrible loss, there will be those who appear with a desire to help. The Book of Job shows us the good and the bad of such offers of assistance. Sometimes the helpers bring only clichés. These clichés show that these would-be helpers have not walked this path and that their suggestions are little more than repetitions of old ideas. They, too, will have to face the tests of faith as they come to see the emptiness of their advice.

I remember so well in an early pastorate visiting a beloved member of our congregation who was facing surgery the next day. Recurring cancer had invaded several organs, and the surgery would be long and difficult. His faith was as strong as ever as we sat together in his room. “No matter how it goes tomorrow, it will be okay,” he calmly told me. He had long ago come to terms with his humanity and mortality, committing it all to God. He could not answer all the questions about his disease or his future, but it would be okay. To live would be a gift, and death an entry into a heavenly home.

“No matter how it goes tomorrow, it will be okay,” he calmly told me.

QUESTIONS

1. Name some people from your experience who might fit the description of being “blameless and upright” (1:1). What qualities of life did they exhibit that lead you to give them this characterization?

