

Series Job

This Message Introductions to the Book and to the Man Job

Scripture Job 1:1-5

Today we begin a series of messages on the Book of Job. This book is the primary source of philosophical teaching about why righteous and innocent people suffer. This question is at the crux of theological studies about God. How can an all-knowing and all-powerful God allow evil? How can a loving God allow His righteous followers to be afflicted with misery? How can the justice of an almighty God be defended in the face of evil, especially in regard to the suffering of those who are innocent of wrong-doing? Unfortunately, the presence of evil in the world has led many people to conclude that God is neither almighty nor loving and just.

The ancient Israelites accepted without question that God is almighty, and that He is perfectly just. In order to accept these characteristics and explain the presence of sin, they had to make another assumption: that no human is completely innocent in the sight of God. On the basis of logic, they concluded that physical suffering was the consequence of behavior which was displeasing to God. They assumed that human sin and guilt was behind the miseries of the sufferer.

According to this way of thinking, pain experienced in this life is proportional to the amount of sinful behavior, and joy is proportional to right behavior. Suffering is assumed to be the consequence of an individual's transgression, and material prosperity was God's reward for godly behavior. It was assumed that people get what they deserve in this life. Whenever there is suffering, the root cause was presumed to be sin.

While these conclusions might have seemed to individuals in the ancient world as self-evident and a logical explanation to the problem of suffering in the world, they have not always been borne out in actual human experience. There have been individuals, like the main character in this book, who genuinely worshipped God, who had upright moral character, and who, though not sinless, consistently repented and sought to keep themselves from repetitious sinful behavior, who nevertheless endured bitter suffering. The opposite is also often true: wicked people can be very successful, and comfortable and prosperous.

The problem of why righteous and innocent people suffer was not perplexing to those individuals who adhered to a logical “orthodox” theology. Sometimes these people had a rather dogmatic attitude about their understanding. There are examples of these people in the story of Job.

However, for those individuals who sincerely sought to please God, their suffering, when it occurred, was an enigma. Their circumstances could not be explained by conventional “orthodox” theology. At the center of the enigma was the nature and character of God. It seemed to righteous sufferers that there was a capriciousness about God. Was God doing good or ill to people according to His whims? Why did bad things happen to His faithful people? Why do good things happen to bad people? Thirty-five of the 42 chapters in this book are focused on this enigma.

It will be important for us to keep the correct focus as we think about this book. Most readers look for cause-and-effect solutions for their aches and pains and other difficulties in their lives. Many readers conclude that there is no God because of the persistence of their problems. They reason that an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving, and all-benevolent God does not exist or else He would take away evil and suffering.

What we will discover in our study is that God never explicitly answers our human-centered questions about evil and suffering. At the end of the book, God will reveal to Job, and through him, to us, that the answers to life’s problems are not as important as simply knowing how awesome and wise and sovereign He is. God wants us to accept and apply those realities about Himself that He reveals to us. He knows that if we understand who He is, we will be able to trust Him no matter what misfortune happens to us. The story of Job helps us to understand the proper attitude that a believer should have when the calamities of life strike. It requires an attitude of submission to the sovereignty and wisdom of God Almighty, especially when we don’t fully understand the reasons for our sufferings.

We're going to read and think about the first 5 verses in a few minutes, but first it will be helpful to have some important background information. There are several unknowns and uncertainties about this book. There has always been the question whether the book of Job is to be regarded as history or parable. Among most Jewish scholars the prevailing opinion is that the story of Job is historical, although some of the Rabbis think that the person of Job was dreamed up in the creative imagination of the writer of the book in order to set forth his teaching.

We don't know the author of the book. Moses, Solomon, Isaiah, and Hezekiah are among the individuals who have been suggested, but the fact is that the Book of Job is one of history's anonymous literary masterpieces. We can be certain that the writer was a religious Jew because he used the covenant name of God (Yahweh) several times. We recognize that the writer was a poetic genius. The form and flow and imagery of the writing is acknowledged by literary experts, both secular and religious, as outstanding. We can also say that the author was a deep thinking philosopher. His objective was to communicate his thoughts about a puzzling human problem in an instructive way. Poetry allowed him to use figurative language, word images, and imagination to help his readers to understand reality in ways which are otherwise difficult to explain.

There is no agreement about when the book was written. Commentators have opinions ranging as early as the time of Moses and as late as the Babylonian exile, a range of about 1000 years. Job is mentioned in the writings of the prophet Ezekiel, which means the book had to be written before the end of the exile period, but the writer does not mention Israelite history or give any other clues which help to determine the date of writing. Most of the Hebrew wisdom literature was written during the lifetimes of Kings Solomon and Hezekiah, 1000 and 700 BC respectively, and most scholars assume this book was written during one of these periods.

Another uncertainty is the time of the setting of the story of Job. There are several reasons to think that Job lived in the time of the patriarchs. He was possibly a contemporary of Abraham. Like other patriarchs, he lived a very long time, almost 200 years. Like people of that era, his wealth was measured in the number of animals he possessed. Like the other patriarchs, he served as priest for his family.

Two groups of people from the patriarchal period, the Sabeans and Chaldeans, are mentioned in chapter 1. History tells us that these groups were nomadic prior to 1000 B. C., but after that date they began to settle into communities and eventually became the dominant people in what is, at the present time, Iraq and Arabia. The Major Prophets frequently referred to the Babylonians by their original identity as “Chaldeans.”

Job was not a Hebrew, and there are no allusions in the book to Jewish traditions, customs, or modes of thought. There are references to sacrifices, but no references to the law or to the tabernacle. The text describes the simplicity of lifestyle of people who live in tents.

Scripture considers Job to be a real man, not a mythological figure. He is named by the prophet Ezekiel as one of the three great men of the Old Testament, along with Noah and Daniel (*see Ezekiel 14:14, 14:20*). He is also mentioned in the New Testament by James, who referred to Job's patience and steadfast endurance (*James 5:11*). That's the background to the Book of Job.

Let's read Job 1:1-5

We are informed in the very first verse that Job was blameless, upright, feared God, and shunned evil. It is important that we understand his exceptional character before the rest of the story begins to unfold. The story would have no meaningful impact on us apart from our knowledge of his religious sincerity and moral uprightness. He is the righteous and innocent man who suffers.

Job is not described as “sinless,” only that he was ethically upright, morally above reproach, and religiously devoted to God. The terms “blameless, upright, feared God, and shunned evil” meant that Job maintained a deep and devout reverence for the Lord and that he held God in highest awe and respect. His life was in harmony with the ways of God.

The word “shunned” is especially interesting. The literal meaning is that Job found evil to be “nauseous” and disgusting. In other words, Job was unusually sensitive to everything that would be designated as evil, and he did whatever he could to avoid behavior that was unclean, cruel, and displeasing to God.

In verse 8, which will be part of our study next week, we learn what the LORD thought of Job. In describing Job, the LORD used the same words as in verse 1. He was identified as a man unlike everyone else on earth, a man who “was blameless and upright, a man who feared God and shunned evil” (*Job 1:8*).

Verses 2 and 3 inform us that Job had a large family and was a very prosperous man. In the Ancient Near East, a large family, many servants, with immense herds of sheep, camels, oxen, and donkeys, would be regarded as the evidences of divine favor. Job was described as “the greatest man of all the people of the East.” He was as great as he was good.

Verses 4 and 5 give an example of Job’s godly concerns. He had seven grown sons who each had their own houses. According to the text, each son would “take turns holding feasts in their homes.” The Hebrew language implies that the feasts were identified with “the day of his birth” (*same word in Job 3:1*). In other words, the feasts were birthday parties. In most of the world, birthday parties are organized by, not for, the celebrant. According to the text, each of Job’s sons would invite in turn his siblings to a celebratory feast.

Apparently, Job was concerned about these parties. When they were over, he would send for his children and purify and consecrate them. His objective was “to sanctify, set apart, make holy, and dedicate them to the Lord.” Job would offer burnt offerings for each of his children the morning after their feasting. Job did this because he was concerned that they might have sinned by cursing God in their hearts during their times of eating and drinking. Job did not want them to push God out of their minds and hearts.

There are a couple of insights we can gain from this explanation of Job’s actions. The obvious one is that Job was greatly concerned that his children live God-honoring lives. Job’s God-oriented concerns were focused on his family as well as himself.

A second insight is a confirmation of the context of this story. Before the Law was given to Moses at Mt. Sinai, it was the patriarch of a family who served as priest and offered sacrifices. This was before the Levitical priesthood was established. Abraham and Melchizedek, who were also from this period of time, were other examples of family priests.

The sacrifice of animals as a covering for the guilt and shame of sin was instituted by God after the disobedience of Adam and Eve. Like other people of faith in the Old Testament, Job felt it his duty as a father, and as a follower of God, to offer atonements for his children through the sacrifices of burnt offerings for each of them, and then to accompany the sacrifices with their rededication and consecration to the LORD. Undoubtedly, Job also offered up earnest prayers and intercessions for his children. The last sentence in our reading explains that “this was Job’s regular custom.”

That’s the picture of the man who is going to be tested, severely tested, in this story. The picture in these verses is brief, but we are given sufficient reasons to have a very favorable opinion about Job. All the information indicates that life for him was love, contentment, joy, comfort, and all the good things that a person would want.

Job is set before us as an example of the kind of person who was a delight to God. He was both righteous and upright. There is an idiom which declares: “Tell us what a man loves, and we are able to tell exactly what the man is.” Sometimes the idiom is worded a little differently: “Tell us what a man thinks most about, and we are able to tell exactly what character he has.” The quality of a person is revealed by his or her favorite pursuits. Job was a man who “feared God and shunned evil.” Job was inclined toward God in a very positive and serious way and, therefore, a model for us.