

## The Faith Of Job

By any standard, the *Book of Job* ranks among the greatest literary works of works of all time.

The sheer artistry of the book—it's grandeur of language, its depth of feeling and its intense drama—rival literary masterpieces such as *Hamlet* and *Paradise Lost* and *The Canterbury Tales*.

In addition to this, the *Book of Job* deals with some of the most basic philosophical and theological questions of human existence.

Questions like:

Why do terrible afflictions fall upon a righteous person?

Why does God sometimes remain silent in the face of our desperate prayers?

Why do we see so little justice in the world?

Why do the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper?

If the world was created by an altogether good and loving God, where did evil come from?

These are tough questions.

And for these reasons, Christians and Jews have always struggled with the *Book of Job*.

I'm pretty sure that you all know how the story of Job starts out.

As a result of a wager between God and satan, God allows satan to visit terrible suffering upon Job.

Satan takes away every good thing Job had—his land, his children, his possessions and his health.

Job accepts all this and still retains his faith in God.

*"Naked I came from my mother's womb and naked I will depart. The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away: blessed be the name of the Lord."*

But then, alone in his pain and misery and scorned even by his own wife, Job asks God, “Why? Why?”

But God remains silent.

Then Job's friends begin to show up and offer their explanations as to why God has “done” this to him.

First he is counselled by a friend named Eliphaz who proposes that Job must have done something sinful to deserve the suffering he is experiencing, because God is just and would only send suffering as punishment for sin.

This is not an illogical proposition: our natural way of thinking is that God rewards us for our virtues and punishes us for our sins.

But we know that this is not the case with Job.

Job has done nothing to deserve the treatment he is receiving, so Eliphaz' advice is useless to him.

Job can only deduce from his situation that he has somehow become God's enemy and this adds to his torment.

His second friend, Bildad, then tells Job that not only must he have sinned in order to deserve punishment, but that his children must have sinned as well in order to deserve to die.

He advises Job to “clean up his act” by repenting of his sins and living a morally pure life.

This advice is useless: no one can live a morally pure life.

And so the net effect of both friends' counsel is only to add to Job's confusion and agony.

He needs encouragement and love, but they give him only law—and irrelevant law at that.

Disheartened by his friends' words, Job begins to view God as a wielder of power rather than an administrator of justice—let alone mercy.

*“How then can I dispute with him? How can I find words to argue with him? Thought I were innocent, I could not answer him; Even if I summoned him and he responded, I do not believe he would give me a hearing. He would crush me with a storm and multiply my wounds for no reason.”*

Job is beginning to view God as a “might makes right” God—not in the sense of a bully, but in the sense that whatever God ordains must be right simply because God ordains it.

Job is willing to let God be God; he does not dispute God’s “right” to do as He pleases—he just doesn’t understand why God is doing what he is doing to him.

And in view of God’s refusal to respond to his questions, he begins to view God as uncaring and even cruel.

*“When a scourge brings sudden death, he mocks the despair of the innocent. When a land falls into the hands of the wicked, he blindfolds its judges. If it is not God, then who is it?”*

Then a new thought occurs to Job: if God will not deign to answer him, perhaps there is someone else—a mediator—who could communicate with God in his behalf.

*“If only there were someone to arbitrate between us, to lay his hand upon us both, someone to remove God’s rod from me so that his terror would frighten me no more. Then I would speak up without fear of him but as it stands with me, I cannot.”*

This thought comes in the form of an “if only”—a vain hope that enters Job’s mind, but it turns out to be the seed of a larger—and bolder—notion.

Then his 3<sup>rd</sup> friend, Zophar, begins to speak and what he has to say to Job is merciless, to say the least.

His logic is the same as Eliphaz and Bildad’s logic—God is just—and ONLY just—and therefore not only does Job deserve what he’s getting, he deserves worse than he is getting.

*“Are all these words to go unanswered? Is this talker to be vindicated? Will your idle talk reduce men to silence? Will no one rebuke you? Know this: God has even forgotten some of your sin.”*

In other words, Job deserves to be punished even more than he has been punished.

Despairing of any comfort or sympathy from his friends, Job has nowhere to turn—**except to the same God who is the source of his misery.**

Then he utters one of the greatest statements of faith anyone has ever uttered:  
“*Though he slay me, yet I will hope in him*”

“*Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him.*”

Someone once said that *the hope is a flower which grows only on the verge of the abyss.*

Though everything is against him Job still hopes for deliverance—and bases his hope on faith in the one who has allowed him to suffer without offering a single word of explanation or encouragement.

His hope may be only a bud, but it is all he has and he clings to it.

He rushes on to say, “*If a man dies, will he live again? I will wait for my renewal to come, You will call and I will answer you; you will long for the creature your hands have made...My offenses will be sealed up in a bag; you will cover over my sin.*” (14:13-17)

Job has only two options: He can leap into the abyss of despair (in his wife's words, “curse God, and die,”) or he can struggle upward toward God in hope, even though it seems that God is determined to destroy him.

Job takes the second path.

And through his pain-filled eyes he begins to discern an advocate in heaven—a friend and intercessor who is pleading his case before God.

“*Even now my witness is in heaven; my advocate is on high. My intercessor is my friend as my eyes pour out tears to God; on behalf of a man he pleads with God as a man pleads for his friend.*” (16:19-21)

From the pit of despair, Job's faith presses upward, seeking the light of grace and deliverance even as his suffering continues.

Bildad hurls more accusations against Job.

*“When will you end these speeches? Why are we regarded as cattle and considered stupid in your sight? You who tear yourself to pieces in your anger, is the earth to be abandoned for your sake?”*

Under assault from his friends and seemingly ignored by God, Job is brought to the brink of apostasy, of losing his faith.

*“...God has wronged me and drawn his net around me. Though I cry, ‘I’ve been wronged!’ I get no response; though I call for help, there is no justice. He has blocked my way so I cannot pass; he has shrouded my paths in darkness. He has stripped me of my honor and removed the crown from my head. He tears me down on every side till I am gone; he uproots my hope like a tree. His anger burns against me; he counts me among his enemies.”*

The net is drawn tighter and tighter.

Job has been deserted by everyone—his kinsmen, his guests, his servants and his family—and he is only assaulted by his friends.

He cries out: *“How long will you torment me and crush me with words? All my intimate friends detest me; those I love have turned against me. I am nothing but skin and bones; I have escaped with only the skin of my teeth. Have pity on me, my friends, have pity. Why do you pursue me as God does? Will you never get enough of my flesh?”*

Job’s anguish is the suffering of the terminally ill.

His body is rotting away and his pain is intensifying.

In short, Job is dying.

And if the story ended here, the *Book of Job* would indeed be a book of despair, like something written by Sartre or Camus or one of the other alienated, despairing 20<sup>th</sup>-century existentialists who envisioned life as worthless, meaningless and absurd.

But the *Book of Job* doesn’t end here; in fact spiritually speaking it **begins here** with the greatest confession of faith in the Bible.

Job cries out: ‘Oh, that my words were recorded, that they were written on a scroll, that they were inscribed with an iron tool on lead or engraved in rock forever! For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand

upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—and not as a stranger. How my heart yearns within me!”

With these words, Job plants the flag of victory over his own grave.

The uncharitable, accusatory rhetoric of his friends has forced him to the conclusion that the only consolation available to him must come from the same God who has tormented him.

“Though he slay me, yet I will hope in him.”

The extremity of his suffering which has been forced upon him by the devil, the world and his own flesh forces him to look for mercy to the same God who is behind it all.

It is as if he thinks that God must have another side, another face, and as he desperately looks for that “other side or other face of God, he begins to discern it in the form of his heavenly advocate.

His redeemer.

Job’s friends see only a man who is dying in agony under God’s wrath.

But Job envisions a living redeemer in heaven who has not yet descended and taken on human form, but who one day will stand upon the dust that covers Job’s mortal remains and raise him up to new life.

And Job will behold this Redeemer with his own eyes and not those of a stranger.

How like God to bring salvation and joy out of suffering and misery!

Martin Luther once wrote that in looking back on his life, the times he was in despair were the times when he was closest to God’s grace.

The story of Job is an allegory of every Christian’s life.

We all gradually die to this world and return to dust and are raised up by a Redeemer to new life.

And to those who have placed their faith in that Redeemer, He will be no stranger.

So if it is true that in the midst of life we are surrounded by death, it is also true that in the midst of death, there is new life.

For like Job, we know that our Redeemer lives.

Amen.