



IN THE FACE OF SUFFERING



STUDY SERIES ON THE BOOK OF JOB

INTRODUCTION

The book of Job is one of the most perplexing yet rewarding books of the Bible. It recounts the life of Job - an incredibly godly and wealthy man who loses everything and is then forced to make sense of his new reality.

As you read Job, you'll be confronted with the deepest and most painful expressions of the human experience. If you're looking for concrete answers, however, you won't find them here. The book's purpose is not to answer questions, but to open our perspectives to the complexity of the world and the way God runs the universe.

We hope that over the next six weeks, the book will open up honest conversations about the reality of suffering and the ways we can support each other through it.

Overview

The book opens with a dialogue between God and a mysterious character called "Satan", who challenges the integrity of Job's faith. Satan accuses Job of only loving God because of what God has given him. God then allows Satan to take everything from Job - his wealth, family and health. Job, however, has no idea why he is suffering.

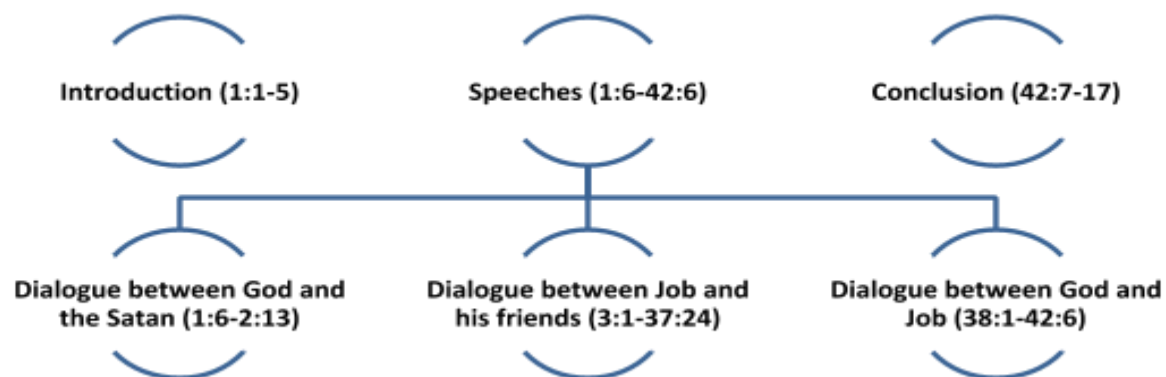
It then comprises a debate between Job and his friends as to why he is suffering. Job's friends associate his suffering with his sin, while Job insists on his innocence. However, in the final chapters, God has the last word. He vindicates Job's innocence while opening Job's perspective to His design for the universe that Job can't even begin to comprehend.

What do we know about Job?

Not much is known about Job, except that he was not an Israelite. He was from the land of Uz (Job 1:1), which may have been the land of Edom (Lamentations 4:21). However, he was certainly a believer in the God of Israel. As he offered sacrifices to God on behalf of his family (Job 1:5) and had a nomadic lifestyle, he might have lived around the time of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Structure

The book of Job is not really a story - it is almost dominated entirely by dialogues. The plot only appears briefly at the start and the end. It primarily explores Job wrestling with his suffering and engaging in conversations with his friends and ultimately with God.



How should we read Job?

The book is essentially a **wisdom debate** where Job and his friends go back and forth on why Job is suffering. It might be hard to read because it was written as poetry. The book does not simply present arguments with flat-out logic, but rather draws readers in with amazing rhetoric.

The key is to understand its purpose. As part of wisdom literature, the book of Job corrects those who misunderstand the book of Proverbs, which outlines the actions and attitudes required to live well in God's world. The righteous receive blessings (Proverbs 16:7) while the wicked are brought to ruin (Proverbs 5:22). However, these were never meant as universal promises. They describe what **usually** (but not **always**) happens.

Job's friends misunderstand these proverbs by treating them as universal promises. The book of Job, therefore, re-examines the relationship between righteousness and reward by presenting a much more complex world.

Another purpose is to explore the nature of genuine faith in suffering. While the book does not tell us **why** we suffer, it explores **how** we can respond to suffering. With all of his complaints, arguments and even missteps along the way, Job is ultimately vindicated by God

at the end (42:8). Although Job is not perfect, his conduct is largely an expression of real faith in painful times. The book, therefore, enlarges our responses to suffering.

Lastly, the book questions God's character and way of running this world. If Job is innocent, is God unjust in letting him suffer? We will find out that God does not run His world simply as a judge, but also that we cannot begin to imagine the complexity of God's ways and purposes. It will open us up to God's power and wisdom which transcends human beings.

Seeing Christ in Job

Although Jesus Christ is not mentioned in the book, echoes of Christ are everywhere! Most importantly, the innocent suffering of Job prepare us for the innocent suffering of Christ. The book shows us a righteous sufferer, which is ultimately witnessed in the person and work of Jesus Christ. He is the truly innocent sufferer - crucified like a criminal for us. In Jesus, you will see one who endures human suffering with us to give purpose and hope amidst our pains.

The cross of Christ reminds us that our suffering in this world is purposeful. His resurrection reminds us that our suffering is temporary. One day suffering and death will be destroyed as we see God face to face (Job 19:26).

FAITHFULNESS IN SUFFERING

Context

The book of Job begins by introducing a man so godly that even God calls him “blameless and upright” (verse 1).

1. Do you know a person like Job? What impact did that person have in your life?

Observation

Shortly after Job is introduced, God and Satan have a dialogue in verses 6-12.

2. What is the significance of the dialogue? How is God in control through the conversation?

Meaning

3. Job is described as “blameless and upright” - is he sinless (verse 5)?
4. As Job’s life crumbles in front of his eyes, his conclusion is to worship God. How does he express his worship? What does his worship reflect about his heart (verses 20-21)?

5. Through the dialogue between God and Satan, we know that Satan is the one bringing suffering to Job. However, Job believes it is God who has taken away his children and possessions (verse 21). Surprisingly, the narrator concludes that "Job did not sin or charge God with wrong" (verse 22).

How do you reconcile Job's acknowledgment that God takes away his children and possessions yet not charging God with wrong?

6. Job's life is a foreshadowing of Jesus'. What are the similarities and differences of their suffering (Isaiah 53)?

Application

As we study the book of Job, we will learn how to comfort those who are suffering. However, chapter 1 is all about Job's suffering. Although it is devastating and painful for Job to lose his children and possessions, his greatest treasure is God.

7. Based on Job's character and responses, how can we prepare ourselves for inevitable suffering?
8. How can we show the world in practical ways through our suffering that God is our greatest treasure?

Pray that God will help us to learn deeper about suffering through the book of Job.

Study 2 | Job 2:11-13, 4:7-11 and 8:2-10

WISDOM WHEN THINGS GO WRONG

Context

After losing his children and possessions, Job then suffers physically with boils and open sores. He feels miserable (3:26), has trouble sleeping (7:4), loses his appetite (3:24) and despairs of his future (7:7).

As Job descends into depression, at first he wishes that he had never been born (chapter 3) and later that he would die (7:5). Hearing of Job's misfortune, his three friends visit him to help. They offer words of advice after hearing Job's complaints, but they misunderstand Job and his situation, as well as mischaracterise God's actions in the world. This unfortunately adds to Job's suffering - foreshadowing the taunts Jesus receives on the cross (Matthew 27:42-43).

1. How have others helped or comforted you in a time of need?

Observation

- 2.

Verse	How are Job's friends trying to help?	Is it helpful?
2:11		
2:12		
2:13		
4:7-11 & 8:3-4 (compare to 1:5 and 8:4)		

8:2		
8:5-7		
8:8-10		

Meaning

3. Eliphaz (4:7-11) and Bildad (8:3) express a characterisation of God's actions in the world. What is their view? Is it consistent with the rest of the Scripture and the life of Christ?

Application

4. How have others tried to console you in unhelpful ways?
5. How is Jesus similar to and different from Job's friends? Can you share a personal experience from a time of need (e.g. 2 Timothy 4:16-17)?

Ask each other how you can help practically and **finish by praying**.

LIVING WITH UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

Context

Job continues with his complaints to God, seeking answers for the suffering that he is experiencing. He was the greatest of all the people of the east (1:3) yet now he loathes his own life and speaks in the bitterness of his soul (10:1).

Just like Job, in many ways we do not understand why we suffer. God's plans are beyond our understanding. However, we take comfort that we will ultimately find the answers to our questions in Christ and that God always has a bigger plan than we realise.

Observation

1. Job asks God multiple rhetorical questions. What is he seeking to understand?

Meaning

2. What are the similarities and differences between Jesus and Job's reaction to their suffering (Luke 23:46 and Matthew 26:42-44)?
3. How does Job respond to his suffering (verses 14-20)? Are these words of faith or unbelief?

Application

4. Job asks why God is against him (verses 1-7). He feels dehumanised and questions the fairness of his situation. How can we encourage a brother or sister in Christ who is experiencing unfair treatment and questioning God's goodness?

5. How does Christ's humanity and incarnation help us deal with unanswered questions about our suffering (Hebrews 4:15)?

Pray as a life group to reconcile your lack of understanding with God's bigger plan and to acknowledge his sovereignty in whatever suffering you may be experiencing.

HOPE IN SUFFERING

Context

A man lives peacefully in a remote tribal village with his family. One day, invading militia from an enemy tribe kills the man in cold blood, kidnaps his children and violates the women. The invaders stay on and continue to threaten and terrorise the villagers.

Torrential floods have washed and decimated a farmer's house and land. His wife and four children are missing. His crops have been destroyed, ruining any prospects for the next harvest. The aftermath has also left the community starving from lack of food and the surrounding land is rampant with disease-spreading carcasses.

A bustling new boutique in Melbourne CBD was the current talk of the town, boasting a great location and an incessant stream of customers. The owner had just signed a new lease, ordered a fresh supply of stock and hired new employees. However, since COVID-19, sales figures plummeted to zero overnight. Now the owner is overwhelmed with financial troubles - ongoing rent, unpaid salaries and the prospect of bankruptcy.

These three situations may give us an insight into what Job is going through in chapter 19. In the earlier chapters, his friends have interpreted that Job's situation is God's punishment for the ungodly.

*"Surely such are the dwellings of the unrighteous,
such is the place of him who knows not God."*

(Job 18:21)

Observation

1. Job is experiencing suffering in a multitude of ways. What are those?
How do they inflict pain on him (verses 2-7, 8-12, 13-19 and 20)?

Meaning

2. Job attributes God as the author of his suffering (19:8-12 - see also 2:10). Are these verses incompatible with his faith? Why or why not?
3. If you were God, how would you feel watching Job suffers as an innocent man (Exodus 3:7 and Psalm 18:6)?
4. Satan claims that Job's faith will crumble when he suffers. God agrees not to intervene to prove that Job is truly faithful. How does Job keep his faith even when God does not alleviate his suffering (verses 23-27)?
5. A redeemer is one charged with the duty of restoring the rights of another and avenging his wrongs. He must be alive to advocate on one's behalf. Why does Job mention "my redeemer lives..." (verse 25)? What does he hope the redeemer can do for him (Hebrews 7:23-25)?

Applications

6. As Christians, how do we interpret our own suffering? When we do not have a clear explanation, where do we draw our hope from (1 Peter 2:23)?

Share with your life group about a situation when someone is experiencing suffering without relief. **Pray** for help and comfort for this person.

Study 5 | Job 38:1-18 and 41:1-11

GOD IN SUFFERING

"O Lord my God! When I in awesome wonder, consider all the works Thy hand hath made!"

Carl Boberg, How Great Thou Art (1885)

Context

COVID-19 has slowed things down - giving us an opportunity to stop and take notice of God's creation. The peaks of the Himalayas are visible from Punjab, India, for the first time in 30 years as pollution drops amid social isolation.

This glimpse of God's wonderful creation, literally obscured by man, is quite a sight to behold. When we focus and witness the wonder and splendour of God's creation, we cannot help but stand in awe of God the Creator himself.

As God speaks, Job is exposed to the magnificence of God's plans and purposes - the order of nature with such complexity, beauty and mystery that only God can orchestrate.

Observation

1. According to God, Job obscures His plans (NIV) or darkens counsel by words without knowledge (ESV) (38:2). What is it about Job's words that causes this (10:1-7)?
2. God reminds Job of the vastness and intricacies of His creation (38:4-18). What point is God making that answers Job's complaint?
3. God mentions Leviathan (41:1-11) - a seven-headed mythical dragon representing the forces of evil in the world. What reactions does this conjure up? How do these verses help us understand God's power over evil?

Meaning

4. Job and his friends have been debating on the nature of God's justice in the world. How does the complexity behind God's design (38:4-18) redirect Job's perspective on his suffering?
5. How does God's ability to subdue Leviathan and evil (41:1-11) lead to Job's confession (42:2)? How does this convince us to trust God?

Application

6. Where is God in the midst of COVID-19? Is COVID-19 part of God's plan? How does God work through COVID-19? Are these the right questions to ask and why?
7. How might our conversations about God and suffering obscure our view of His sovereignty and grace? How can we focus our hearts and minds on God's plans and purposes by redirecting those conversations?

Pray that God will reveal how we might obscure our own view of God, so that we will never lose sight of the Father's perfect redemption plan through His Son - our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

"This cornerstone, this solid ground, firm through the fiercest drought and storm."

Keith Getty and Stuart Townend, In Christ Alone (2001)

RESOLUTION

1. If you were God, what would you change about the world?

Context

God reveals himself to Job through a series of questions (chapter 38-41). As Job questions God's justice in allowing him to suffer (despite his innocence), God shows Job the immense complexity of His purposes for the world.

God does not operate the universe on a single principle of justice (i.e. the righteous are rewarded and the evil are punished), but there is more than Job could ever imagine. The world is nowhere near as simplistic as Job's presumptions.

Job is satisfied. He has a new appreciation of the scope and harmony of God's world, where he plays just a small part. He can't begin to imagine what it would be like to be God!

Observation

2. Based on verses 1-5, what is Job repenting of in verse 6?
3. Through the book, Job has quarreled with God, doubted his justice, insisted on his own innocence and wanted his life to end. Meanwhile, Job's friends condemn him - concluding that his suffering is God's punishment for his sin.

At the end, God is angry at Job's friends for not speaking what is right of God as Job has (verse 7). What has Job got right about God that his friends have not?

Meaning

4. Job's prayer interceding on behalf of his friends (verse 9) happens **before** his fortunes are restored (verse 10). This vindicates Job's innocence and shows his friends that Job is a righteous sufferer - even a suffering intercessor on their behalf. How does this prepare us for the coming of Christ? What should we expect from Him?

5. The ending of the book (verses 10-17) might feel like a cop-out. Job gets everything back and more. Is Job just rewarded for good behaviour or repentance - similar to the Prosperity Gospel? How should we respond to this?

Application

6. Reflect on the book of Job as a whole. While the book has not fully answered why we suffer, what have you learned about:
 - a. how to endure suffering
 - b. how to help others in their suffering

7. How would you explain in a few sentences to a non-Christian what the book of Job was about and how it pointed to Jesus?

Pray for your life group to continue good conversations about suffering and to grow in our care and concern for those inside and outside our community who may need help.