

## Reading Job...

In our reading challenge, we have begun the fascinating book of Job. It is a popular book because it deals with the issue of suffering in a fallen world – an issue we all have to deal with at some point and to some degree. However, at the same time, it is an often-misunderstood book. What things should we consider as we seek to understand it?

First, there important *structural* observations to consider. There are key chapters in the book that help the reader to make sense of what is going on: chapters 1-2 provide important ‘behind-the-scenes’ information that the characters in the story do not know about, chapter 28 is a poetic reflection on the nature of ‘wisdom,’ and chapters 38-41 contain divine speeches which address Job’s situation, yet in an unexpected way. Pay attention to how these chapters relate to the speeches of Job and his friends.

Second, there are a number of *questions* to consider. The following is just a sample:

- What are the ‘tensions’ in the book? Who is on ‘trial’?
- How is the character of God considered?
- What is the role of ‘wisdom’ and how do the characters display or fail to display wisdom and why?
- How are we to make sense of God’s evaluation (42:7-8) and the lengthy dialogues of the Job’s friends (did they say anything ‘right,’ if so, what was wrong?)?
- What solutions does the book provide? Did Job’s friends have an answer? How did God answer? Does God answer Job’s questions or imply different questions?
- Is Job at fault at some point in the book?
- How do we make sense of God comforting Job (42:11) for trials He actively permitted in his life? How is God to be understood as the ‘God of all comfort’ in such situations (2 Cor 1:3-5)?
- What does God emphasize in chapters 38-41? What do Job’s friends emphasize?

Lastly, consider *how the book of Job speaks of Christ*, and in turn, how it speaks to us. First of all, Job provides a category of an ‘innocent’ sufferer. Yes, Job was just a man and not without sin, but with regard to the events in the book, his sin was not the direct cause of his suffering (not unlike a similar point that Jesus makes [cf. John 9:3]). Christ, of course, is the ultimate innocent, sinless sufferer. Not only is He that, He also answers the question, ‘can (or does) God bring good out of evil and suffering?’ The cross is the ultimate answer. Through this ultimate expression of evil on the part of sinful man (Acts 2:23; 3:14-15; 4:27-28), God brought about the greatest good the world will ever know. If God can do that on such a grand scale, *certainly* He can work all things for good in your life (Rom 8:28). There is also hope expressed by Job with regard to a vindicating ‘redeemer’ (19:25), forgiveness (14:17) resurrection (14:14), and victory over the enemy (26:13). Of course, these hopes are ultimately fulfilled in Christ.

One last thought—as you read this book, submit even your questions about suffering and evil to the authority of God (i.e. willing to have them revised and corrected), rather than merely looking for answers to them. Sometimes we ask the wrong questions. Keep reading!

Jason Hunt

## **Reading Job: Making Sense of Job's Friends...**

As you make your way through the book of Job, you will come across three cycles of speeches (the third cycle is incomplete, as the argument collapses) from Job's three friends: Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar (chapters 4-25), and later, input from Elihu (chapters 32-37). That is 28 chapters—over half of the book. Yet, God's evaluation of Job's three friends is *negative* (Note: Elihu's message is not that much different, though it does prepare the way for God's response):

*ESV Job 42:7 After the LORD had spoken these words to Job, the LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite: "My anger burns against you and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. <sup>8</sup> Now therefore take seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and offer up a burnt offering for yourselves. And my servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly. For you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has."*

This begs the following questions: *how are we to make sense of this evaluation? How were they wrong? Is there any value to their words?*

*How are we to make sense of God's evaluation? How were they wrong?* It is not that everything they say about God is untrue (e.g., God does punish the wicked and He is just [e.g., 4:7-11; 8:3ff; 18:5-8]). Rather, it is their strict application of a 'retribution' principle (i.e. if you sin, then you suffer; so, if you are suffering, then you are a sinner or have sinned) to Job's situation which is wrong. Their evaluation does not fit with what we know from chapters 1-2. In sum, their arguments are ultimately unwise and not God-honoring in their application. Of course, Jesus Christ, a man of sorrows and well-acquainted with grief, suffered more than anyone and was utterly sinless. This alone, turns their 'retribution' principle on its head. By the way, people often make the same mistake today (as Job's friends did) in trying to make sense of suffering.

*Is there any value to their words?* In the context of the book, Job's friends teach us how *not* to approach suffering. Their speeches, in light of the wisdom poem (chapter 28) and God's response (chapters 38-42), point us to other Scripture passages in order to evaluate them (even ones outside the book of Job). In other words, we need to understand and evaluate their words in

context—of the book and of the rest of the Bible. When they bring up various truths about God (e.g., his omniscience, majesty, justice, etc.), we must look at how they are being applied by them and ask whether it is consistent with the rest of Scripture. That said, avoid the temptation to skip over these chapters in order to get to what God says at the end. These chapters present a ‘contest of wisdom’—who is wise? Job or his friends? In doing so, they depict common responses that we also tend to have toward suffering. We learn about wisdom not only from God’s response, but also by reading about man’s struggle for it.

Keep reading!

Jason Hunt

## Reading Job 26...

According to our current SAPC Reading Challenge, you won't get to Job 26 until February 28<sup>th</sup>. However, I wanted to highlight a few things in advance. Why? Because it contains one of my favorite verses (verse 14).

Chapter 26 begins the last speech of Job (chapters 26-31). He is immediately responding to the words of Bildad (25:1-4; note Job's use of second person singular pronouns, 'you' [26:2-4]). After critiquing and questioning Bildad's approach (with some sarcasm), Job offers a beautiful sketch of the Almighty, full of rich imagery and wonder (v.5-14; similar to his earlier response to Bildad in 9:5-13). So, what makes it so encouraging?

One of the most encouraging things we can do is to meditate on the character of God. Job highlights a number of truths about God that, in a way, serves as a precursor to the Lord's speeches at the end of the book (chapters 38-41). First, he highlights God as *Creator* (v.5-10). Then, he highlights God as *Redeemer* (v.11-13), using rich imagery used elsewhere in Scripture to describe redemption and victory over His and His people's enemy. Lastly, he provides a summary statement of God's incomprehensibility:

*Behold, these are but the outskirts of his ways, and how small a whisper do we hear of him! But the thunder of his power who can understand?" (Job 26:14 ESV)*

Think about it—creation and redemption, as merely the “*outskirts of His ways*”?! That seems like a lot to us, and it certainly is! Yet, to the infinite one, it is only the tip of the iceberg, in relation to His glorious character and abilities. The puritan, Stephen Charnock, in his famous work, *The Existence and Attributes of God* (published posthumously in 1682), used this verse as his theme verse for an extended meditation on the *power* of God. Here are a few quotes from his essay:

*“More glorious things are within his palaces...these are but little crumbs and fragments of that Infinite power” (2:9)*

*“There is infinitely more power lodged in his nature, not expressed to the world” (2:10)*

*“Man’s power, being limited, his line is too short to measure the incomprehensible omnipotence of God” (2:10)*

Let’s consider some practical application. What is incomprehensible about God is comprehensible to Him. It is not a dark mystery for us to be afraid of (as if we may find out something we wish we didn’t know), but rather one to hope in. There are no ‘skeletons in God’s closet.’ Everything we will ever learn about Him will be wonderful, because He is holy and beautiful in his inmost, infinite being! What remains incomprehensible (and there will always be that for finite creatures), will only prove to be a blessing to us, as His people. In our trials and sufferings, we are often tempted to doubt God’s ability to help us. When you are tempted, remember Job 26:14—*nothing* is too difficult for Him.

Keep reading!

Jason

## Reading Job 28...

When we began reading the book of Job, I mentioned that chapter 28 was a key chapter in the book. It is a poetic meditation on 'wisdom' in the midst of the back-and-forth dialogue between Job and his friends. The dialogues seem to spin in circles—a struggle to discover the reason for Job's suffering. Job's words in chapter 28 provide some perspective on chapters 3-27 from the standpoint of 'wisdom' and where it is to be found. So, what does this chapter tell us about 'wisdom'?

Through human ingenuity, man can mine precious stones and obtain food from the earth—bringing hidden things out into the light (v.1-11), but obtaining wisdom is a different story. Human ingenuity cannot discover wisdom through mere investigation of the physical universe, nor can it be bought. Though it is more valuable than anything else in creation, it is not found in the land of the living (v.12-19). Where is wisdom to be found? God knows. It is inaccessible on a mere human level. God's intervention is necessary (v.23-28). In fact, elsewhere in Scripture, we see that the tendency of sinful man is to seek wisdom apart from God—seeking to be 'wise,' but instead, becoming fools (cf. Rom 1:21-23). Unregenerate man even concludes that the ultimate display of God's wisdom (the cross) is folly (1 Cor 1:18). How then is man to 'find' wisdom? Verse 28 sums it up well (sounding a lot like Proverbs 1:7; 9:10):

“And he said to man, 'Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding.'”

How does this inform the dialogues surrounding Job's situation? Job and his friends need to 'fear the Lord' (i.e. reverence and submission to His character and authority). Job affirms this here in chapter 28 (at least in principle). However, it is not until chapter 42 (v.1-6) that we see him fully embrace it. In the meantime, Job's friends do not assess his situation with wisdom. They presume to be 'wise' based on what they see and conclude Job is being punished for his sins. They need to repent and be forgiven for their display of false wisdom (42:7-9).

What does this mean for us? It means that we need to cultivate our fear of the Lord, in reverence and submission, knowing that He knows all things and that He knows best. Fear of the Lord also involves running to Him as our refuge and strength in the midst of our suffering, praying for wisdom and perspective as we face trials of many kinds (James 1:5-8).

Keep reading!

Jason Hunt

## **Reading Job: Making Sense of Elihu...**

One of the more debated sections of the book of Job is when Elihu, a younger man (32:4-9), comes on the scene (chapters 32-37). He seems to promise something different with his contribution. However, scholars differ with regard to how to evaluate Elihu's contribution to the dialogues between Job and his three friends. Some see him as presumptuous and brash, while others are very positive in their evaluation, considering the length of his speech and no negative response from the Lord (unlike Job's friends). Does he add something new to the dialogues? If so, what? What is the function of his speeches in the book? In order to answer these questions, we look not to the silence (e.g., no evaluation from God), but rather to what is in the text.

Elihu was angry with Job for justifying himself rather than God, and with Job's friends for providing no answers (32:2-5). He certainly promises a new argument (32:14), with a different tone (33:6-7). However, he does chastise Job for his declaration of purity and for viewing God as his enemy (33:8-11; 34:5-6). It would seem that at least Elihu's emphasis is a different than Job's friends. God disciplines us for our good (vs. merely as punishment for sin, like with the wicked). He generally has a more positive view of suffering.

Though there are differences, Elihu's answer is not without some peculiarity. First, he insinuates that Job is suffering for his sin and must repent and he will be restored (e.g., 34:11-12, 36-37). In other places, it is hard to tell if he is rebuking Job for his sin lurking behind his suffering or merely for what he perceives as a sinful response to his suffering (e.g., 33:9-13). If the latter, he would be in line with God's later rebuke. Second, he suggests that God doesn't need to answer Job, and downplays such a possibility (34:23; 35:13-14; 37:23a). What a surprise, when God actually answers Job in the chapters that follow!

So, what are we to make of Elihu's words? His speeches function to prepare the way for God to speak in chapters 38-42. First, it is clear that there is no ultimate resolution on a human level (as demonstrated by Job's friends' lack of a satisfactory answer). Second, he emphasizes that God has answers (cf. Job 28). Third, he points Job to the character and works of God which have parallels in the divine response. Lastly, he prepares the way ironically, through a contrast of expectation. He does not encourage Job to expect a response, but the Lord does respond. Even with his positive contributions, something more is needed in order to gain wisdom in the situation—a divine answer to make sense of things.

The case of Elihu is a good reminder to not jump to conclusions when considering an argument from silence. Good biblical interpretation takes the silence into account, but focuses on what is actually in the text. Keep reading!

Jason Hunt

## Reading Job: Behemoth & Leviathan

After Elihu's speeches, the Lord answers Job (chapters 38-42). His answer is largely taken up with aspects of creation (1st speech [38-39]) and justice (2nd speech [40-41]). Regarding the latter, we come across descriptions of the mysterious creatures, Behemoth (40:15-24) and Leviathan (41:1-34). What are they and what do they have to do with Job's situation?

The plain reading of the text seems to indicate that these are actual created animals (cf. 40:15). However, there is no clear consensus on exactly what animals they are. The text does not specify. Perhaps, that is not the point. In addition, especially with regard to Leviathan, the description seems to go beyond a mere animal (41:18-21—dragon like qualities). So, how do they function in this context and what do they represent?

The immediate context points to God's ability to humble the proud and tread down the wicked in judgment (40:11-14). Man cannot save himself from such evil (40:14), but God can. Then, comes the descriptions of Behemoth and Leviathan. Though a full discussion is beyond the scope of our purposes here, some scholars have argued that these animals are also symbolic of death and Satan, respectively (see: Fyall, *Now My Eyes Have Seen You*, 117-174). Behemoth is described in ways similar to the Canaanite god of death, Mot. Sometimes, Scriptures uses the mythology of the nations, not to affirm their reality, but to prove a point, and even argue against it. Moreover, 'beasts' used as symbolic of evil are not without precedent in Scripture (cf. Daniel 7; Revelation 12-13). Indeed, 'Leviathan' appears in other contexts, associated with 'curse' (Job 3:8), with Egypt in the Exodus (Ps 74:14), and with the ultimate enemy which God will defeat in the redemption of His people: "In that day the LORD with his hard and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will slay the dragon that is in the sea" (Isa 27:1). Here, Leviathan is associated with the "fleeing serpent" and the "dragon" (cf. Job 26:12-13—the fleeing serpent is linked with Rahab, and both are linked with the defeat of Egypt in Isaiah 51:9), both being symbolic of Satan in other passages (Rev 12:9; 20:2).

The point in Job is the impossibility of human beings to control these animals and what they represent (40:15-16, 23-25; 41:1-3, 10-11). If Job cannot stand against the powers of Leviathan, how can he stand against God (41:10)? Only God has the power to stand against both, death and the Devil. That is what Job needed to know in his suffering (remember that Satan was involved, though not ultimately in control, in Job's suffering [chapters 1-2]). Indeed, in Christ, He has defeated them both (cf. Heb 2:14)! We also need to be reminded of this in our suffering.

Keep reading!

Jason Hunt

## Reading Job: God's Answer

As we come to the end of the book of Job, the Lord finally speaks (chapters 38-42). However, His answer doesn't seem to answer the why question that had been the subject of the dialogues in the book. Even the behind-the-scenes glimpse that the reader gets from chapters 1-2 does not ultimately answer this question. So, how are we to make sense of God's 'answer'?

First, as we looked at last week, God highlights His relationship to creation and justice as important things for Job to consider. In particular, we looked at how the extended discussions of 'behemoth' and 'leviathan' function in the speeches (and throughout the Bible), as representing both, death and evil. With regard to both, God is Lord over them and defeats both through the Person and work of Jesus Christ. This is an important and hopeful reminder in the midst of suffering. There is no ultimate 'problem of evil'—Christ solves it.

Second, Job had spoken without knowledge (38:2). In suffering, questions naturally arise. However, we must be careful not to become presumptuous and accusing toward God—as if He has 'some explaining to do' in order to justify Himself. Job's responses at the end recognize this very point (40:3-5; 42:1-6). Rather, we must go back to His word to not only find perspective, but comfort too. We are also invited to pour our hearts out before Him (Ps 62:8), casting our cares upon Him because He cares for us (1 Pet 5:7).

Third, God is never obligated to inform us why certain things are happening in our lives. In fact, one of my seminary professors suggested that if He were to explain all His reasons for everything, we couldn't take it all in or comprehend it! Rather, He is more concerned with how we react to things we face—in faith or unbelief. Indeed, that should be our focus in whatever circumstances we find ourselves in. Will we trust in the Lord or not?

Fourth, one of the questions that came up in chapters 1-2 was the following: are we willing to honor God only when it serves our self-interests (1:8-12; 2:3-5)? It is easy to answer this question in theory, but harder in practice, in the midst of our suffering. Nonetheless, it is an important question for us to consider.

Lastly, we are reminded that though we may feel like the why question is the most important one to answer, in Job, the most important question is where is wisdom to be found (chapter 28)? Scripture is clear: it is only found in God. Hence, we should run to Him for wisdom, as our Refuge in suffering rather than wait until we get our questions answered first. It is important to note that part of submitting to His lordship is to submit our questions to the authority of His word, being willing to have even our questions redirected. In Job's case, God gives answers to questions that Job did not ask, but should have asked.

Keep reading!

Jason Hunt