

Job 1-3

How can we hope in suffering?

Renton Christian Fellowship

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Introduction


Recently I started a summer series at my church exploring the book of Job – so this morning I thought I would share some of my thoughts on the first three chapters of Job.

Many Christians come to the book of Job wanting answers to questions about suffering. We see difficult situations as questions that need answering, problems that need solving – but we won't get very far with the Bible or Job if that's our way of reading it.

Of course we come to the Bible with questions, concerns, hopes and fears – some of which we will find God answers directly. But our main attitude needs to be *listening* to what *God* wants to say to *us* through Scripture, rather than what we might want or wish him to say – which means trusting he knows what we need to hear! That's a much better attitude for reading the Bible.

When we read Job like *that*, we discover that God *doesn't* answer Job's questions, at least not in the way we usually understand 'answers'. And that can be incredibly frustrating because they are big questions that many of us wish we knew the answer to:

Why does God allow bad things to happen? Why does he seemingly do nothing to put them right? Why do people who could not care less about God thrive and prosper? What kind of God runs a world like *this*? *Is* he in charge? Where was God in << *insert disaster here* >>? What about the suffering of children? Why does he heal this illness and not that one? When things go wrong for me, is God punishing me? And the big one: can I *really* put my trust in God? You may have other questions, many from a place of experience and deep pain.

God does answer Job in the end, **out of the storm** (38.1), but he doesn't help Job understand *why*. Job is never told why he suffers. Instead he is invited to trust God, despite only seeing a small fragment of reality – and so are we. The blessing for us is that we know  Jesus, who died in our place, who rose to new life, who ascended to the Father's throne, and who lavishes his Holy Spirit upon us. We won't know *why* but we can know *who* – and we are invited to trust him in good times and in bad.

Job is a true believer (1.1-5)

Has anyone watched any of *The Crown*? I watched the first couple of series, but haven't seen much since then – largely because we cancelled our Netflix subscription!

Annie Mae and Abigail asked us about it and other historical dramas about the monarchy – and I can tell you, although the people and wider events are real, everything else is entirely fictional. The late Queen was famous for *never* sharing her opinion publicly, except when it came to her own faith.

Sometimes with the Bible it's hard to tell the history from the poetry. Job is one of those books. For starters there's **the land of Uz** (1.1). No-one knows exactly where that is, other than it's not part of Israel. Then there's the date – the book directly quotes other parts of the Bible so it was likely written down later, but the settings feels like the time of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Did Job really exist? Did all this happen as described? Or is it a long poetic parable? The references to Job in Ezekiel (14.14 & 20) and James (5.11) suggest there *was* a righteous man named Job who persevered in faith. But the book's teaching still stands whether Job existed or it's a parable like Jesus' Good Samaritan.

Let's dive in and see what kind of man Job was:

In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil.

Job 1.1 (NIV)

This doesn't mean Job was perfect. He was a man of integrity who lived out what he spoke, was loyal to God and straight with others. And he was wise: ¶ Job 28.28 mirrors verse 1: **'The fear of the Lord – that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding.'**

If ever there were a good man, it was Job. And if ever there were a wealthy man, it was Job; in Hebrew thought wealth was a sign of blessing or approval from God – which is why the disciples were so surprised when Jesus taught them how hard it is *even for the rich* to enter the kingdom of heaven (e.g. Mark 10.23-26).

¶ [Job] had seven sons and three daughters, and he owned seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred donkeys, and had a large number of servants. He was the greatest man among all the people of the East.

Job 1.2-3 (NIV)

He even made **regular** sacrifices on behalf of **each of** his children in case they had **sinned** (1.5). Christopher Ash, who wrote a book on Job called *Out of the Storm*, puts it like this **¶**:

Here before us at the start of the story is the true believer *par excellence*, a man who walks before God with a clear conscience, his sins confessed and forgiven, his life showing all the marks of a worshipper.

Ash, Out of the Storm, 17

In an ordered world there should be no surprise that such a man received such blessing from God – he deserved it!

But then the curtain is drawn back and we get a glimpse into the spiritual reality that is going to affect Job's world in terrible ways. Look out for these **¶** four key points or markers – both today and as we journey through the book together:

1. **¶** Job really is blameless
2. **¶** Satan has real influence
3. **¶** The Lord is absolutely supreme
4. **¶** The Lord gives terrible permissions

And as things turn ugly remember the key question: **¶** will Job stay a true believer, no matter what?

Job is accused (1.6-12)

I am extremely forgetful. I put things down and forget where they are – so when I look in the place they're supposed to be, *they've been moved...* and of course it's never my fault, it's always *someone else* – and Jess has learned that the joy of being married to me means it's always *her* fault. 'What have you done with...' or 'Where have you put...' are two common accusations in our home.

We are ever so good at accusing others of things, and a lot less ready to accept responsibility ourselves.

That is one of the roles of Satan – the Hebrew word isn't really a name, it's a title and it means *adversary* or *accuser*. In verse 6 he enters God's court, and we are given a glimpse behind the scenes of the spiritual reality that Job doesn't know about.

Satan has been **'roaming throughout the world, going to and fro on it'** (1.7) – a disconcertingly vague answer to God's question. The implication is he's been out causing trouble for God's people.

'Have you considered my servant Job?' God said, 'There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil' (1.8).

We've heard those words before, in chapter 1 verse 1 – and again in chapter 2 verse 3 . This is the first of the four markers: **J** Job *really is* **blameless and upright** – not perfect but a man of integrity and wisdom. God also describes Job as **'my servant'**, a mark of honour given only to a few in the Old Testament.

At this, Satan scoffs (verse 9, from Peterson's *The Message*):

J 'So do you think Job does all that out of the sheer goodness of his heart? Why, no-one ever had it so good! You pamper him like a pet, make sure nothing bad ever happens to him or his family or his possessions, bless everything he does – he can't lose! But what do you think would happen if you reached down and took away everything that is his? He'd curse you right to your face, that's what.'

Job 1.9-11 (MSG)

Satan taunts God: 'Your world is totally ruined. The only reason Job worships you is because of what's in it for himself. Take all that away and then you'd see the *real* truth.'

I don't think any of us here is as wealthy as Job, but for all of us Satan's words bite: if we had *nothing*, if *everything* were stripped away, would we still have faith?

Then comes verse 12:

¶ The Lord said to Satan, ‘Very well, then, everything he has is in your power, but on the man himself do not lay a finger.’

Job 1.12 (NIV)

In that verse we see three of our four markers. ¶ Satan is given real influence by God. But he has to ask first – there is no dualism at play here, no sense that good and evil are equal and opposite: ¶ God is absolutely supreme, ¶ and he gives terrible permissions.

We mustn’t skip over this. We should be shocked that God gives Satan permission to make the blameless Job suffer. We can’t let God off the hook. He isn’t ‘doing his best’ but can’t quite control the devil. No, the Bible is clear: Satan is on a chain, he is limited, but he *is* given terrible permission to make Job suffer.

Which begs the question: does Satan attack Christians like this today? It’s complicated: yes *and* no.

Yes – Peter tells us that the devil prowls around God’s people like **a roaring lion** (1 Peter 5.8-9). Paul encourages us to put on God’s armour so we can resist **the devil’s schemes** (Ephesians 6.11). He is still a dangerous enemy for God’s children, and he still has terrible permissions.

But also no – we live after the cross, on which Jesus **disarmed the powers and authorities** (Colossians 2.15). Revelation 12 vividly portrays the battle between God and a great dragon, which is defeated **‘by the blood of the Lamb’** (Revelation 12.11). The Satan still accuses, *but God isn’t listening*, and God’s people don’t need to listen either because **there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus** (Romans 8.1).¹

Job is a worshipper (1.13-22)

For Job, it was awful. Sticking to the limits set by God, Satan goes out (1.12) takes away everything from Job: his oxen and donkeys (1.14), his flocks of sheep (1.16), his camels (1.17), most of his servants, and finally all of his children (1.19).

J At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head.

Then he fell to the ground in worship and said:

‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb,
and naked I shall depart.

The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away;
may the name of the Lord be praised.’

In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.

Job 1.20-22 (NIV)

Those words of Job are famous: **“The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away, may the name of the Lord be praised.”** But how could Job speak those words after the unspeakable things that had happened? How could Job praise God?

For praise him he does – and in so doing he threatens Satan’s whole project of hostility and opposition to God. Job’s worship proves that although the world is not the ‘very good’ world of Genesis 2, neither is it the total ruin Satan would have us believe.

In Job’s words I see echoes of **another man in agony, praying and begging God, “Take this cup away from me; yet not my will, but yours be done”** (Luke 22.41-44). Somehow in the midst of their agony, both Job and Jesus worshipped – and as they did that, they defeated Satan who wants us to give in to despair.

There was a time in my life when I lost almost everything: house, job, marriage, friends, and I had glandular fever so was unable to work. Were it not for my parents taking their 25-year-old son back in I don’t know what would have happened to me. For months I was unable to set foot inside a church building. I remember once being halfway down the path to my dad’s church, and I turned round and went back. For a long time I gave in to the despair. I was so angry.

When I face difficult situations I often turn into the petulant child that lives inside many of us: I throw a spiritual tantrum, pout my spiritual lips, cross my spiritual arms and turn my spiritual face away from God. Too often I do not have the faith to follow the example of Job and worship despite it all.

That's a feeling I suspect many of us share. But I believe part of the journey of faith is helping that inner child to grow up and mature as a woman or man of God – recognising that faith does not require understanding, that God is God and worthy of our praise, no matter what happens. Job knew that, Paul taught that and the psalms can help us express it in our prayers and worship. After chapter 3 Job goes round and round in circles for chapter after chapter – I think one reason for that is because maturing in faith is not something that happens quickly or easily.

Job is blameless (2.1-10)

Things get worse for Job in chapter 2. God points out that Satan was wrong: Job has remained faithful despite Satan's best efforts (2.3). 'Ah,' Satan replies, **‘But if you took away his health – then he'd curse you to your face’** (2.4, MSG). As before, Satan has real influence, God is supreme, but gives terrible permission.

The boundary God sets this time is that Satan **'must spare [Job's] life'** (2.6) – it's **a condition that many today wish, and Job himself wishes, had not been imposed... Job's suffering is so intense he longs for death, but cannot find it.**²

¶ The picture of Job in chapter 2 verses 7-8 is a pathetic, almost funny if it weren't so tragic, picture of a man sitting in the dust, scraping his skin with a **piece of broken pottery**.

If you've ever been bitten head-to-toe by mosquitoes or had a condition where you itch all over, you'll know the agony he was in. Scratching helps in the moment but doesn't make the itch go away – and often makes it worse.

¶ Maybe Job's wife hates to see him like this. Maybe she's so angry with God she can't stand the way Job refuses to curse him.

Verse 9 (MSG): **'Still holding on to your precious integrity, are you? ¶ Curse God and be done with it!'** she says. But Job replies (2.10, MSG), **'You're talking like an empty-headed fool. We take the good days from God – why not also the bad days?'**

The NIV ends the section with these words: ¶ **In all this, Job did not sin in what he said** (10). Remember our first marker? ¶ Job *really is* blameless: not perfect but wise and full of integrity.

Job is alone (2.11-13)

So chapter 2 ends with **J**Job, alone, scraping himself with **a piece of broken pottery**, sitting **among the ashes** (2.8). That word refers to the heap of rubbish that smouldered outside the city. In Jesus' day the one outside Jerusalem was called 'Gehenna' and he used it as a way of talking about hell, it was so awful.

It's here we meet Job's **friends: Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite** (2.11). Like Job they aren't Israelites; they represent the best wisdom that the world has to offer. They don't live near each other – and there were no emails or phones so it took months for them to hear what had happened, to communicate and then travel **together**; in 7.3 Job complains about the **'months of futility'** he has suffered.

But they are *good* friends. The way we often use the word 'friend' today really means 'acquaintance', but the word here means much more than that. Proverbs 18.24 talks about the **friend** who is **closer than a brother**. David's friend Hushai risks his life to work inside the court of David's enemies (2 Samuel 16.16-17). In *The Four Loves* CS Lewis writes movingly of the rare love of true and genuine friendship; this life **has no better gift to give**, he says.³

Job's friends **set out from their homes**, and travelled to see Job **to go and sympathise with him and comfort him** (2.11). To some of us that might sound patronising but it's not meant like that. *They go to him* – even to the stinking burning rubbish heap, to see their friend in his agony. If you have a friend who's really hurting, that's a good way to start: to go to *them*, to show them your love and friendship by being *present*.

I remember visiting my Grandad in hospital – he was near the end, and almost unrecognisable. His skin had changed, he'd lost half his body weight – but the hardest thing was the confusion in his eyes. All through his life he did the *Times* crossword while drinking a cup of tea, he taught me so much about generosity, he saw things in a brilliant, straightforward way. All that – my Grandad – was almost entirely gone.

I'm sure many of us here have had a similar experience when we have seen loved ones towards the end of their life. Have that in mind when you hear these words describing Job's best friends:

When they saw him from a distance they could hardly recognise him; they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads.

Job 2.12 (NIV)

They were devastated – and they didn't know what to say. To be honest I don't blame them:

They sat on the ground for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was.

Job 2.13 (NIV)

At this point of Job, sometimes people talk about **the compassion of a silent presence**, which is **more eloquent than words**.⁴ There is truth in that: sometimes simply being with people is not only enough, it's the best thing to do.

And certainly once Job's friends start speaking, they show the truth of what my Mum tried to teach me: if you can't say something true, helpful or kind, keep your mouth shut. It's a lesson I am still learning today!

But I'm not sure what happened here was that good. It's a great example of needing to listen to what the Bible *actually* says.

Firstly, **they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads** (2.12). This was to show sympathy – but it was also a cultural symbol of mourning. Then we have the **seven days and seven nights** of silence (2.13): the standard period of mourning.⁵

Perhaps the mourning was for Job's children and servants and all his other losses, but the text suggests it was actually *Job himself* they were mourning for,⁶ like he was *as good as* dead.

Plus, to start with silence may well be the most appropriate thing to do... but for *seven* days and nights? Christopher Ash says:

¶ To sit quietly with a sufferer, to hold their hand, to listen patiently as they pour out their grief is one thing. ¶ But... **to refuse to speak a word to a sufferer for seven days and seven nights is eerie and not comforting.**

Ash, Job: The Wisdom of the Cross, 62

But did you notice the text says **no one said a word to him** (2.13)? Ash continues: **it may not have been silence after all, but just a refusal to speak to Job, which is quite another thing.**⁷

Whatever the reason for their silence, Job was **suffering** (2.13) and *alone*. His wife was there, his friends were there, but the image painted for us of Job is a man who is utterly alone.

¶ I remember when I was single going on holiday with an old work colleague, her parents, husband and children – who each took a friend. We had a lovely busy week together in Cornwall; there were ¶ nine of us in all.

At the end of the week I drove home. It was late October, and dark when I arrived. I put a pizza in the oven and turned on the TV – and there was a power cut. Off went the lights, the TV and the internet. It was pitch black and utterly silent.

I couldn't even call or text someone because the power cut affected the cell phone service too. In contrast to the week I'd just had the loneliness was horrible – but it was temporary.

For some the loneliness and suffering has no end in sight.

How might *you* respond to people who are really suffering? Some silence is good, showing love simply by being there. But sustained silence is *not* good. ¶ What might *you* say? What might *you* ask?

I suggest *not*, 'I know how you feel,' or telling a story about *your* experience; focus on *them* not you. It might help to think about what *you* might like someone to say to *you* when *you* are suffering. For the truth is – and it's a hard but important truth – sometimes God takes his children through deep darkness.

Job is suffering (3.1-26)

After a week of no-one saying **a word to him** (2.13), Job finally breaks the silence (3.1) and out pours raw emotion. Chapter 3 is not an easy read. It's the darkest chapter of the whole book.

As I read some of it, listen to all the different words for darkness that Job piles one on top of another (verse 4):

‘That day [the day of Job’s birth] – may it turn to darkness;
 may God above not care about it;
 may no light shine on it.

May gloom and utter darkness claim it once more;
 may a cloud settle on it;
 may blackness overwhelm it.

That night – may thick darkness seize it.

Job 3.4-6 (NIV)

Now look down with me at verse 11 to see the ‘why’ questions tumbling out of Job’s mouth ¶:

11: **‘Why did I not perish at birth?’** 12: **‘Why were there knees to receive me?’** 16: **‘Why was I not hidden away in the ground?’**
 20: **‘Why is light given to those in misery, life to the bitter of soul?’** 23: **‘Why is life given to a man God has hedged in?’**

¶ Why, ¶ why, ¶ why, ¶ why, ¶ why?

Job feels stuck, trapped by what has happened, by God himself. He wishes he had never been born. He doesn’t understand. All he knows is pain: physical, emotional and spiritual pain.

He sees only darkness, is **bitter of soul** and full of inner **turmoil**:

‘What I feared has come upon me;
what I dreaded has happened to me.

¶ I have no peace, no quietness;
I have no rest, but only turmoil.’

Job 3.26 (NIV)

Is that a feeling you recognise? I certainly do. He is exhausted by his grief, like when you have no more tears to cry and feel utterly spent. Yet this chapter reminds me of another man in turmoil, in a garden at night, *his* three friends also silent. ¶ Job’s restlessness foreshadows Jesus going back and forth between his anguished prayer and his silent, sleeping disciples in Gethsemane. For there we begin to see the seeds of hope even in the darkness. They are small, so small in the darkness they are hard to find. But for all *our* loneliness we need never be as alone as Job, because Jesus **suffered and died alone**.⁸

In the garden and on the cross Jesus knew the full depth of human loneliness and suffering, ending with the agonised cry, **‘Why have you forsaken me?’** (Matthew 27.46). On the cross Jesus did not only wear our sin and shame, but our loneliness too.

Sometimes God takes true believers through the darkness and turmoil of Job 3 – but even then Jesus’ promise holds true: **‘I am with you always, to the very end of the age’** (Matthew 28.20).

The Horse and His Boy

I’m going to end with a reading from **J** *The Horse and His Boy*, the third of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Shasta is the Boy. He grew up with a bad-tempered fisherman, and runs away with a Narnian horse – which can talk – when he discovers the fisherman isn’t his real father and is about to sell him to an abusive nobleman.

He has many adventures and meets many people. In this passage Shasta has been separated from all his companions and he’s lost, riding a horse – a different horse, which can’t talk – over a high mountain pass in darkness of night.

Once more [Shasta] was alone amid the drip-drip from the trees. He remounted his horse and continued along the road he had chosen. Strange, icy winds kept blowing mist past him though they never blew it away. If he had been used to mountain country he would have realized that this meant he was now very high up – perhaps right at the top of the pass. But Shasta knew nothing about mountains.

Being very tired and having nothing inside him, he felt so sorry for himself that the tears rolled down his cheeks.

What put a stop to all this was a sudden fright. Shasta discovered that someone or somebody was walking beside him. It was pitch dark and he could see nothing. And the Thing (or Person) was going so quietly that he could hardly hear any footfalls. What he could hear was breathing. His invisible companion seemed to breathe on a very large scale, and Shasta got the impression that it was a very large creature.

The Thing (unless it was a Person) went on beside him so very quietly that Shasta began to hope he had only imagined it. But just as he was becoming quite sure of it, there suddenly came a deep, rich sigh out of the darkness beside him.

‘Who are you?’ he said, scarcely above a whisper.

‘One who has waited long for you to speak,’ said the Thing. Its voice was not loud, but very large and deep.

‘I can’t see you at all,’ said Shasta, after staring very hard.

Once more he felt the warm breath of the Thing on his hand and face. It said, ‘Tell me your sorrows.’

Shasta was a little reassured by the breath: so he told how he had never known his father or mother and had been brought up sternly by a fisherman. And then he told the story of his escape and how they were chased by lions and forced to swim for their lives; and of his night among the Tombs and how the beasts howled at him out of the desert. And he told about the heat and thirst of their desert journey and how they were almost at their goal when *another* lion chased them. And also, how very long it was since he had had anything to eat.

‘There was only one lion,’ said the Voice.

‘What on earth do you mean? I’ve just told you there were at least two the first night, and –’

‘There was only one: but he was swift of foot.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I was the lion.’ And as Shasta gaped with open mouth and said nothing, the Voice continued. ‘I was the cat who comforted you among the houses of the dead. I was the lion who drove the jackals from you while you slept.

‘I was the lion who gave the Horses the new strength of fear for the last mile so that you should reach King Lune in time.

And I was the lion you do not remember who pushed the boat in which you lay, a child near death, so that it came to shore where a man sat, wakeful at midnight, to receive you.'

'Who *are* you?' asked Shasta.

'Myself,' said the Voice, very deep and low so that the earth shook: and again 'Myself,' loud and clear and bright: and then the third time 'Myself', whispered so softly you could hardly hear it, and yet it seemed to come from all round you as if the leaves rustled with it.

Shasta was no longer afraid that the Voice belonged to something that would eat him, nor that it was the voice of a ghost. But a new and different sort of trembling came over him. Yet he felt glad too.

[As the mist began to clear, Shasta] knew the night was over at last. He could see the mane and ears and head of his horse quite easily now. A golden light fell on them from the left. He thought it was the sun.

He turned and saw, pacing beside him, taller than the horse, a Lion. The horse did not seem to be afraid of it or else could

not see it. It was from the Lion that the light came. No one ever saw anything more terrible or beautiful.

After one glance at the Lion's face he slipped out of the saddle and fell at its feet. He couldn't say anything but then he didn't want to say anything, and he knew he didn't need to say anything.

The High King above all kings stooped towards him. The Lion touched his forehead with its tongue. He lifted his face and their eyes met. Then instantly the pale brightness of the mist and the fiery brightness of the Lion rolled themselves together into a swirling glory and gathered themselves up and disappeared.

Pause

[The next day Shasta travelled back along the same path – only this time, it was not dark. The path became] narrower all the time and the drop on their right hand became steeper. At last they were going in single file along the edge of a precipice and Shasta shuddered to think that he had done the same last night without knowing it.

‘But of course,’ he thought, ‘I was quite safe. That is why the Lion kept on my left. He was between me and the edge all the time.’

Abridged from CS Lewis, The Horse and His Boy, 136-141 & 154

¹ For this section see Christopher Ash, *Job: The Wisdom of the Cross*, 54-56.

² Christopher Ash, *Out of the Storm*, 21.

³ CS Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 87.

⁴ David Atkinson, *The Message of Job*, 30.

⁵ As in 1 Samuel 31.13 etc.

⁶ They tore their robes **when they saw him** (2.12) and were silent **because they saw how great his suffering was** (2.13).

⁷ Ash, *Job*, 62.

⁸ *I stand amazed*, by Charles H. Gabriel.