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# Lost in the Land of Uz

## *How to Read the Book of Job*

*Christopher Ash\**

In my commentaries on the book of Job, I have criticized preaching that majors on the first two chapters and the final chapters, and more or less skims over the long speeches in between.<sup>1</sup> But let me say a word in defense of those I critique in this way. I can understand why people do this. When you and I read Job 1 and 2 or God's speeches in chapters 38–41, we have some understanding of what is going on. There are puzzles, of course, but perhaps no more than elsewhere in the Old Testament. I feel I can preach an edifying sermon from these chapters.

But place me in the seeming morass of the cycles of speeches, and I feel I am in an impenetrable maze. What am I to do when I read the following from Job?

It is all one; therefore I say,

“[God] destroys both the blameless and the wicked.”

When disaster brings sudden death,

he mocks at the calamity of the innocent. (Job 9:22–23)

This sounds terrible and wrong. And yet it is Job who says it! Or what should I think when I meditate on this, from Eliphaz?

Agree with God, and be at peace;

thereby good will come to you.

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1 Christopher Ash, *Job: The Wisdom of the Cross*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014); Christopher Ash, *Out of the Storm: Grasping with God in the Book of Job* (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity, 2004).

Receive instruction from his mouth,  
 and lay up his words in your heart.  
 If you return to the Almighty you will be built up;  
 if you remove injustice far from your tents,  
 if you lay gold in the dust,  
 and gold of Ophir among the stones of the torrent-bed,  
 then the Almighty will be your gold  
 and your precious silver.  
 For then you will delight yourself in the Almighty  
 and lift up your face to God. (Job 22:21–26)

This passage is beautiful. I remember a youth leader treating these words as true and reliable. But the speech is from one of Job’s comforters—and I thought they were all wrong!

#### **NINE GUIDELINES FOR INTERPRETING JOB**

So what am I to do? I can understand why people fight shy of chapters 3–37. How am I supposed to read the book of Job? That is our question. Here are nine guidelines. The first and last are deliberately the same.

##### *1. Ask how the book of Job makes you wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.*

Famously, in 2 Timothy 3:15, Paul says that “the sacred writings” (which, in the first instance, means the Old Testament) “are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” Salvation doesn’t just mean “getting saved” at the start of our Christian lives; mostly it means getting saved at the end of our Christian lives, when our bodies are redeemed (Rom. 8:23; 13:11). So the Old Testament Scriptures are given to enable us to learn how to come to Christ, how to go on trusting Christ, and how to trust Christ to the very end.

The biggest question to ask the book of Job, then, is not “Does this teach me about God’s law, about right and wrong?” but “How does this point me to Christ

and show me how to live by faith in Christ?” Like all the Old Testament, Job points us to the gospel. We shall come back to this at the end.

*2. Don't expect it to be easy: you are learning wisdom.*

Job is a book of wisdom that makes us “wise for salvation.” And wisdom doesn’t come quickly or easily. The search for wisdom is a lifelong pursuit. The questions that the book of Job asks cannot be answered on a postcard or in a tweet; they are big questions that need slow answers. After giving some illustrations of the life of the pastor (2 Tim. 2:3–6), Paul says to Timothy, “Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything” (2 Tim. 2:7). If that’s true for three (perhaps not so very difficult) illustrations, how much more is it true for the complexities of the book of Job.

Wisdom is like the priceless jewel for which the miner risks his life (Job 28); the search for wisdom will take all the yearning, the prayer, the seeking, and the grappling that we have. If you approach the book of Job thinking it’s going to be easy, you are riding for a fall. By a strangely appropriate irony, I wrote much of my longer commentary on Job while going through a nervous breakdown. Wisdom is worth getting, but it is a costly and lifelong task to find it. A few perplexed hours, days, or weeks in the book of Job is a small price to pay.

*3. Read the middle in the light of the ends: (a) anchor to the markers at the start.*

In chapters 1 and 2, the Spirit-inspired writer of the book of Job lays down some markers. Perhaps the most important of these for us to note here is what the writer says three times about Job himself. Right at the start, the narrator tells us that “Job . . . was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil” (Job 1:1). The Lord says the same to the satan:<sup>2</sup> Job is “a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil” (Job 1:8); and then he says it again: “a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil” (Job 2:3). This is clearly important.

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2 In the Hebrew, “satan” is literally “*the satan*,” suggesting that this is a title (“the accuser” or “the adversary”) rather than a proper name.

I will call this Marker One. Job is “blameless,” which means he has integrity. He is not sinless, but he is genuine; he is not a hypocrite. Job is “upright,” which means he treats other people with justice. Job “fears God” with the loving, reverent fear of the believer, the wise fear that is the hallmark of true piety in Proverbs. Job “turns away from evil”; repentance is the shape of his life.

If we do not hear this refrain, we will find ourselves agreeing with Job’s comforters—as when Eliphaz says, “Is not your evil abundant? There is no end to your iniquities” (Job 22:5). Like so many prosperity-gospel preachers, we will chide Job for his unbelief and think that his final blessing comes because he has repented of secret sins he has been denying all along. But Job is not a secret sinner; he is a true believer. What happens to him is not a punishment for sins, but a strange anticipation of the innocent suffering of a later Believer.

*4. Read the middle in the light of the ends: (b) anchor to the markers at the end.*

The writer gives us two more anchor markers at the end.

Marker Two is in Job 42:7, where God says to Eliphaz, “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.” We learn two lessons from this statement. First, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar have not spoken rightly about God. We shall see that they have sometimes said some true things, indeed quite a few true things; Paul even quotes a true statement of Eliphaz!<sup>3</sup> But when we look at the whole picture of what they have said, it is not true.

The second lesson we learn from Marker Two is that Job has spoken rightly about God. While it is possible that this right speaking refers just to what Job has said at the very end, in response to the Lord’s speeches, it seems more likely that this is an overall assessment of all Job’s words. But just as the comforters say some true things while being overall false, so Job says some untrue things while being overall true. And therein lies our puzzle.

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3 The words “He catches the wise in their craftiness” (1 Cor. 3:19) are taken from Eliphaz’s speech in Job 5:13.

Marker Three is that, in his responses to the Lord's speeches, Job does repent. In Job 40:3–5 and then more clearly in Job 42:1–6, Job repents of some of what he has said. He acknowledges that he has “uttered what [he] did not understand.” When we put Marker Three alongside Marker One, we learn that, while Job's friends say that Job is suffering because he has sinned (in his secret misdeeds), in reality he sins (in what he says) because he is suffering.<sup>4</sup>

*5. Don't atomize; read the story.*

So, if the comforters say true things while being overall untrue, and Job says untrue things while being overall true, how are we to read their speeches? Answer: we beware of reading them in too small chunks. This is the bane of small-group Bible studies in so much of the Old Testament: we divide up the text into bite-sized sections and then misapply these little portions. The meaning of the poetic speeches is found by taking them in broad sweeps and by holding them together with the neighboring speeches, and all of them in the context of the big story of the book.

Let us take Bildad's speech in Job 18 as an example. In verses 5–21, Bildad gives the most spine-chillingly accurate and powerful evocation of the terrors of hell. It is all true; it is frightening; the rest of Scripture confirms it. But—and this is the key—he speaks it to the wrong man! In verses 2–4, he chides Job for his words (in which Job maintains that he is not being punished for his sins). He accuses Job of expecting the moral order of the universe (symbolized by “the earth . . . the rock” in verse 4) to be rearranged to suit his convenience. That is to say, he applies his teaching about the judgment of the wicked directly to Job. He implies—pretty clearly—that the wicked man in verses 5–21 is Job himself. The reason that Job is experiencing such “terrors” is that he is one of “the wicked.” He must be; why else is he suffering like this?

Bildad's error is that he assumes punishment will be more or less immediate, and therefore the experience of punishment indicates guilt. Bildad has no

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4 Hywel Jones expresses this point succinctly. See *The Book of Job* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 2007), 26.

place in his system for innocent suffering. While we may indeed learn from Job 18 something of how terrifying are the agonies of hell, the main lesson we learn is that a blameless believer can suffer some of these terrors. This prepares us to grasp just a little more of what the one greater than Job will bear for us.

*6. Look for movement: remember that Job and his comforters start with the same convictions.*

One of the most instructive features to watch for in the cycles of speeches is the movement in Job and the lack of movement in his comforters. All four of them begin with the natural understanding of all moral people, that we live in a universe in which vice will be punished and virtue rewarded. Job holds this conviction at the start as well.

But whereas the comforters will never let the evidence get in the way of a tidy theory, Job grapples honestly with the question as he experiences undeserved suffering. The comforters say much the same at the end as they said at the beginning, albeit a little more irritated by Job. But Job is learning. He responds with the honest humility of a believer.

*7. Don't forget to test everything by the rest of Scripture.*

The Bible is a coherent book. No part of it contradicts another part. So, when wondering about, or puzzling over, a particular difficult text, never forget the old principle of comparing Scripture with Scripture. For example, if I find myself wondering whether the role of the satan means that God is not in full control of events, I comfort myself from the unanimous testimony of the whole Bible that God is completely sovereign and governs all things with his infinite wisdom and power.

*8. Be prepared to live with uncertainty.*

There are enduring difficulties in the book of Job. For one thing, there are a considerable number of textual and translation uncertainties. A good commentary will help you with this, but sometimes you will have to say, "We can't be sure."

And there are some bigger puzzles. One of the most obvious is the enigmatic figure of Elihu in chapters 32–37. Scholars have differed in their assessment of this man, who begins to answer Job and—perhaps—prepares the way for the Lord’s answers. I changed my own mind on this after writing my first commentary on Job and as I worked on my second. At first, I thought that Elihu was an ambiguous speaker, not so very different from the three comforters. I have now concluded that he speaks with prophetic wisdom and is a reliable forerunner of the Lord himself. I have given my reasons for this in the longer commentary. I may be wrong.

When reading a complex book like Job, we need to be prepared to admit that there are questions about which we are not, and perhaps never will be, sure.

*9. Ask how the book of Job makes you wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.*

The central human character in the book of Job is a blameless man who suffers intensely for sins he has not committed. Job in his sufferings foreshadows the Lord Jesus in his undeserved passion. The book of Job helps us to understand a little more of what Jesus suffered and why.

But there is more to it than this. For all who are in Christ, there is an overflow from the sufferings of Christ to us (e.g., Rom. 8:17; Col. 1:24). Just as the satan was God’s ordained accuser to demonstrate that Job was indeed what the Lord said he was, so the satan was God’s ordained enemy to prove to the universe that Jesus was what the Father said he was. And now the satan asks that he may sift the disciples of Jesus. This sifting is necessary, that it may be seen that genuine disciples are indeed genuine.

“Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you [plural, the disciples], that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you [singular, Peter] that your faith may not fail” (Luke 22:31–32). Through the prayers of the Lord Jesus, Peter displays that he is a genuine believer. What is true for Peter proves true for every genuine believer; through “necessary . . . trials . . . the tested genuineness of your faith . . . may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the

revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 1:6–7). Only when some echo of the sufferings of Job comes upon the people of Christ will it be seen that our faith is tested and genuine; then the glory will go to the God who gave us this faith.

The book of Job makes us wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ because it helps us grasp, and trust, the blameless sufferings of Christ for us. But it also makes us wise for salvation by preparing us for a life that walks in the footsteps of Christ, a walk that Job foreshadows for us.

### **JOB’S AGONY: 9:22–23**

Let us go back to the first of the difficult examples with which we began. In Job 9:22–23, Job clearly accuses God of cruel injustice. What do we do when we puzzle over this? It is clear from the rest of Scripture that what he says is not true. But then why does Job say it, and what can we learn from him?

First, we note that these verses come in the middle of Job’s speech that extends through all of chapters 9 and 10. Next, we remember that Job is responding to the first speeches of Eliphaz (chapters 4 and 5) and Bildad (chapter 8), who insist that there can be no injustice in the universe (e.g., Job 4:7; 8:3). Third, we remember (Marker One) that Job himself does not deserve the terrible sufferings he is enduring; we must never doubt this.

So what next? We have two options: either Job is not really as innocent as he says, or the system of Eliphaz and Bildad doesn’t work. Since we know that Job really is innocent, it must be the latter. But Job shares with Eliphaz and Bildad the conviction that we live in a moral universe. The turmoil of chapters 9 and 10 arises precisely because Job is trying to work out how or why the system of which he had been so sure doesn’t seem to be true. And it really bothers him. It worries him intensely. Indeed, it pains him even more than his sufferings pain him; for it seems to him to call into question the justice of God. In most of chapter 9, Job reaffirms the sovereign power of God; he never doubts this. But then, in verses 22 and 23, he makes the (understandable but wrong) deduction that, if God is sovereign, then everything that happens must directly express what pleases him. If injustice happens, it must happen because God wills it to happen.



Here is where we need to bring in the spectacles of the rest of Scripture. From other places in the Bible, we know that Job is right about God being sovereign. Anything that happens, happens because God decrees that it shall happen (Isa. 46:9–10; Rom. 11:36). But we know from chapters 1 and 2 that what happens on earth does not express the will of God in the same way that, for example, goodness and kindness and love express the will of God. Jesus will teach us to pray that the will of God will be “done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). God’s will is done on earth now; there is no question in the Bible about that. But it is not yet done *in the same way* as it is done in heaven. God decrees things on earth that do not accord with his good moral pleasure; he does so because, in his deep wisdom, evil serves his purposes of ultimately greater good. The climactic example of God’s deep wisdom is the cross of Christ, a terribly wicked and ugly act that is, at the same time, the perfect expression of God’s will to save many (Acts 2:23).

And so, we hear in Job 9:22–23 the honest agonies of an innocent sufferer who rightly believes that God is almighty, but is honest enough to recognize undeserved suffering when he sees it. We do not agree that Job is ultimately right to express what he does in the way that he does here; he will need to admit that he has spoken without knowledge (Job 42:3). But he does so out of a heart that loves God, that seeks to honor God, that yearns to understand the mystery of undeserved suffering. That mystery will finally be unveiled only at the cross of Christ.

#### **ELIPHAZ’S REBUKE: 22:21–26**

Now let us take a complementary example. We have looked at something wrong that Job says from a believing heart. Now let us look at something right that Eliphaz says from an unbelieving heart. We noted at the start that Eliphaz’s words here are beautiful and—on the face of it—a gospel appeal to Job to repent. But we know (Marker One) that Job does not need to repent. I do not mean that in an absolute sense; we know that Job does habitually “turn away from evil”; so repentance rightly characterizes his life. But there is no secret hidden sin of which

he needs to repent, which is what Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar think there must be. They are wrong.

So when Eliphaz deduces that Job's sufferings must be evidence of some unrepented sin, he is deeply mistaken. We learn from this that we should be very hesitant to accuse someone of sin simply because we see them suffering. The same spirit would jeer and mock at Jesus on the cross; after all, he is clearly accursed by God, so he must have deserved this curse! But no, Job does not deserve it; he experiences in advance some strange anticipatory overflow of the sufferings of Christ. Jesus does not deserve it, for he who is without sin is made to be sin for the sinful people he came to save (2 Cor. 5:21). Christian believers do not, in a punitive sense, deserve their suffering, for all their sin has been paid for by Jesus. Their sufferings may be the Father's loving discipline (Heb. 12:5-11), but they are not a punishment for sins. We learn from Eliphaz's mistake to be very careful to leave room in our worldview for the undeserved sufferings of one who is in Christ.

#### **KEEP READING**

Don't despair when grappling with the book of Job. Interpreting the book isn't easy, but neither is it impossible. Remember that it points us, like all of Scripture, to faith in Christ. Keep in mind the clear markers at the start and at the end. Read the story in big sweeps; try not to get bogged down in puzzling minutiae. Be prepared to live with some uncertainty about secondary things. Seek to hear, feel, and be moved by the massive anticipations of the sufferings of Christ and then of his persecuted church.

May the Lord give you patience, perseverance, biblical wisdom, and grace to read Job so that you become yet more wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, whom Job so vividly foreshadows.