

## **JOB: ON TRIAL AND IN TRIALS**

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### ***Introduction***

Horatio Spafford was a businessman, not a song writer. His life began to change when he lost his shirt in an economic crash following the American Civil War. His business was just returning and the future looked bright until the great Chicago Fire of 1873 robbed him of his fortunes again.

At least he still had his beautiful family. In the midst of financial troubles, Spafford decided to take a retreat to Europe to contemplate the future. He sent his wife and four children on ahead, promising to join them shortly.

Their ship never reached port. His wife telegraphed him, "All is lost. Only I remain."

Spafford rushed to meet his wife in England. Approaching the site of the shipwreck, the captain informed him of the location of his children's watery grave. How could he find solace after this? He turned to God for comfort and meaning, and he found peace as he gave everything into God's hands.

Today we share in his expression of peace when we sing the hymn "It Is Well with My Soul." Spafford knew something of what the ancient sufferer Job felt when he wrote about the "sorrows like sea billows" rolling over him. Both of these men lost fortunes and family. Yet both Job and Spafford never lost their God.

### ***Historical Importance of the Book of Job***

In the annals of human suffering, few mortals have suffered as Job did. The magnitude of his loss and how he handled it has made his case a paradigm for the philosophical study of human suffering.

Both wise and simple turn to the book of Job sometime in their lives. This one man's suffering provides a microcosm of "everyman's" suffering. Job's transparency of heart reveals his inner agonies and even his secret doubts about God. At the same time, this book paints a wider picture that our personal suffering is not a trifling ripple in the eons of time. Rather, human misery is set against the backdrop of an epic conflict between heaven and hell.

### ***Job the Almost Perfect Sufferer***

What makes Job a model of suffering is that his adversities were more than devastating—they were unrelenting. He lost his fortunes, his family, and then his friends. The worst torture of all was the temptation to think he had lost his God.

Job started well in the midst of his demonic trials. He did not jump out of a window when he lost his estate. When his beloved children were swept away and his wife provoked him, he maintained his faithfulness.

Then Satan escalated the attack. Job's health broke and his wise counselors subtly betrayed him. They planted seeds of doubt about his relationship to the only One Who could deliver Job and unravel the mystery of his suffering.

In the end, God does vindicate Job. This happens, not when his trials get the best of him, but when he repents of his "attitude problem." There is no room for even a hint of self-righteousness before the God transcendent.

### ***The Nature of the Book***

Most of the book of Job is dramatic dialogue and monologue. For power and pathos these speeches rank among the great literary pieces of the world.

Still, the plot from chapters 3-41 is not always easy to trace. Sometimes the poetic dialogue is hard to follow. This is not the case for the prologue and epilogue of the book; they are easy enough for a child to understand. In fact, these two narrative sections make the rest of Job's ordeal more intelligible by showing us what he himself does not see in the beginning—that his very faith is on trial in the court of heaven.

Even more sublime is the thought that God is on trial. The arch-enemy has thrown down the gauntlet. Satan impugns the nature and life-changing power of God's grace as manifested in the life of Job. He accuses Job of being a mercenary believer. (Would not an "easy-believer" have wilted at the first direct blast of the devil's fury?) As a testimony to all creation, God confidently allows His grace to be tested in the suffering of Job, a redeemed saint whose new nature battles against his old nature.

### ***The Crux of the Book***

While the speeches in the heart of the book may appear to be unstructured and even rambling, the book of Job shows deliberate internal design. Students of Semitic literature like Elmer Smick have discovered seven major sections in Job. Its first three parts mirror its last three parts. Its a) prologue, b) opening lament of Job, and c) three cycles of dialogue are designed to balance its c<sub>1</sub>) three monologues, b<sub>1</sub>) closing statement of Job's repentance, and a<sub>1</sub>) epilogue.

These six symmetrical sections all hinge on the book's middle section, chapter 28. This remaining section is the crux of the book's structure and the key to Job's message. Verse 28 is

climactic: “Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, And to depart from evil is understanding.”

Chapter 28 is a transitional “interlude on wisdom” that highlights the theme of trusting God implicitly. Thus the heart of the book departs momentarily from the cavils and conjectures of short-sighted mortals to undergird the theme of God’s sovereignty stressed in the book’s introduction and conclusion. It echoes the importance of implicit trust found in the opening verse, “Job . . . was blameless and upright, and one who feared God and shunned evil.”

### ***The Theological Message of the Book***

Job’s story is a classic literary work that appeals to all audiences. More importantly, Job’s message offers theological answers for those who are searching to understand God’s ways.

While theodicy, the justice of God, is a heavy theme in the account of this righteous sufferer, Job never learned the answer to the age-old question of why a sovereign God allows pain and evil in the world. Nor did he himself ever get an explanation of why God had dealt with him so harshly. God does not justify His ways to men, even as He does not argue His pre-existence when Genesis introduces Him as the Creator.

Still, the reader of the book of Job is given a glimpse into the mysteries of God’s ways when the veil of heaven is opened to reveal the contest between God Almighty and Satan.

### ***Theological Argument of the Book***

More than a contest, there literally is a judicial trial taking place in heaven and earth. The trial in heaven is the main trial; the trial on earth involving Job’s innocence is a subsidiary trial that affects the outcome of the heavenly one. Although not immediately manifest, this book presents a trial within a trial.

Meredith Kline, who has done extensive study in the area of biblical covenants, was among the first to popularize this interpretation of the book of Job. Covenants and covenant theology are prevalent throughout the Bible, and Job’s account, possibly the oldest canonical book, is no exception.

### ***Thesis: A Covenant Trial***

When a suzerain entered into covenant with a vassal in the ancient Near East, both made promises. The vassal servant promised obedience and service, while the master promised protection and provision. To seal this relationship, the servant submitted to curses upon himself that would take effect in the event of treason. In case anyone should impugn the vassal to the master, an inquiry would be made and a trial could be held to see if the master’s threats needed to be executed for disobedience.

Significantly, a servant who felt falsely accused could avoid his accusers by appealing to a “trial by ordeal.” He would declare his innocence and thereupon undergo a physical test. It might mean anything from swimming a swollen river to wrestling the sovereign’s champion defender. This is similar to two champions from Israel and Philistia, David and Goliath, going into a test of combat in order to decide the whole battle between both nations.

### ***Job on Trial***

When we read the book of Job, we see Job going through trials. We need to think also in terms of Job being on trial. First he is indicted by the chief prosecutor, Satan (1:10-12). The word “Satan” is more than a title or proper name; technically it means [legal] “adversary” as in Psalm 109:6,7 (cf. Zechariah 3:1,2).

In the face of this opposition, Job calls for the actual trial to begin (9:14-19). He wants to escape the vagaries of the court of public opinion. Also, he appeals for his own mediator (judge advocate) to present his case honestly before the court of heaven (9:32-35; 16:21; cf. 19:25).

Finally in desperation, Job makes his oath of clearance (chapter 31). He declares his innocence one last time and calls for a trial by ordeal.

The Sovereign God Himself appears in chapter 38 to put Job through the ordeal. It is not a test of physical prowess, but what was known in the ancient world as a “wisdom contest.” It would be similar to the Queen of Sheba’s challenge to Solomon, only in the present case, the Source of wisdom examines a receptor of wisdom. Still the test is carried out under the metaphor of wrestling. Wrestling was a common method of trial by ordeal and is found in the challenge, “Now gird up your loins like a mighty man” (38:3; 40:7a). God serves as His own champion and warns Job to be on guard as He begins (38:3). Then He warns him again after Job has taken a fall and has only one chance left (40:7a).

The wisdom contest takes the form of the scholarly master instructing the disciple by means of catechetical questions about the nature of the world and universe (chapters 38-41). Job had prided himself in his attainment as one of the wisest of men and had sought to instruct his friends in the way of wisdom (27:11). Now he was chagrined to find himself on the receiving end of the questioning, and was more embarrassed yet to discover that he could not answer the Master’s questions.

All through his suffering Job somewhat smugly has been declaring his righteousness before men and God. He stood on his own when God seemed to be silent. Now that God had appeared, Job is forced to yield in his trial by ordeal to his covenant Master. He could not stand on his own. He could only repent in dust and ashes (42:6). Ironically, this outcome brought his acquittal. The final act in the trial is for God the Judge to declare the accused to be innocent (42:7,8 says Job had spoken what was “righteous”). His merciful Master had not intended to grind Job into the ground, but to vanquish him by extracting his true confession that he himself

really was nothing apart from the grace of God (42:2-6). Like Jacob who wrestled with the Angel of God, Job ultimately prevailed with God through tears and supplications.

### ***God Is Acquitted***

Job's case looms large on the court's docket. But remember that an accusation had also been lodged against God by Satan. Because of its gravity, this really is the primary trial in the book of Job.

When God conquered the protesting Job, God is vindicated in His challenge to Satan (1:8; 2:3). Job really did serve his Maker for more than what God gave him. Job's wisdom was to love and know God for Who He is.

### ***Implications***

Understanding the book of Job as a judicial trial of the covenant puts it in a whole new light. The middle speeches with Job protesting his innocence must be taken in the light of the Adversary's early accusations and the Sovereign's finally justifying Job on His terms.

There are other important implications that we can learn from Job's trial and from Job's trials.

#### ***Implication #1***

Job serves as a universal picture of redeemed man's faith on trial.

God Himself describes Job as one of kind among men, "...blameless, upright, fearing God, and turning away from evil" (1:8). In that Job stands a test of fidelity he is almost like Adam, especially in the scene where his wife tempts him as Eve did Adam. Unlike the latter, Job passes the test of fidelity when he rests in the provision of God's grace.

Job is not a federal representative like Adam, yet he may be emblematic of all of God's righteous ones since he appears to be outside the flow of sacred history. In this generic context, he is the epitome of those who will live by faith.

#### ***Implication #2***

The Sovereign God of the universe allows his creation design, yes, even His own character, to be put to the test. This happens when He uses one of His primary creatures, Satan, in testing a vassal made in God's image.

This has implications for the meaning of evil in creation. Our unrighteousness and Satan's nefarious schemes do not thwart the purposes of God. Rather, the God Who

works all things together for good is glorified in sharp contrast to the darker side of life. (Note Romans 3:5.) He easily brings good even out of evil.

*Implication #3*

Consider the durability and predictability of sovereign grace on trial in the life of Job.

The grace of God that keeps us from falling also ensures that His work will be perfected in us, even in the face of a demonic onslaught (Jude 1, 24; Phil 1:6).

*Implication #4*

Ultimately, our wrestlings in the center ring of life are with God, not just with the devil or our own fleshly propensities.

When we struggle against temptations, against the limitations of our mortality, or against opponents who appear to be from the devil, God is watching. Will we like Job “work out our salvation with fear and trembling,” or will we question and fight against God’s providence?

*Implication #5*

Similarly, God wants us to live by faith. God does not ask us to bite the bullet in the face of life’s trials, nor to grin and bear our agonies. He tells us to trust Him in adversity even though we may not know why we suffer or what the outcome will be.

He encourages us with examples like Job whose latter end was better than his beginning. Remember that when Jacob also wrestled with God, he became Israel at Peniel.

*Implication #6*

Finally, no answer is given to Job WHY he suffered. The sovereign God is in heaven and man the creature is on the dust of the earth (Rom. 3:4,5,26).

**Conclusion**

Whenever we start singing “Nobody Knows the Troubles I’ve Seen,” we betray our short-sightedness. Job has been there before. In reality he has experienced all these trials, and the Spirit of God has preserved his experience with God and the devil for our encouragement.

We remember that Job suffered, that he did not get all the answers, and that God was still in control of Job’s life.

In the midst of our remembering, let us not forget the Lord Jesus. No one ever suffered the pangs of body and soul as Jesus did. He suffered by choice. Obedience and a loving heart led him to suffer quietly for others. Let us follow in His steps and “entrust our souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right” (I Peter 2:21; 4:19).