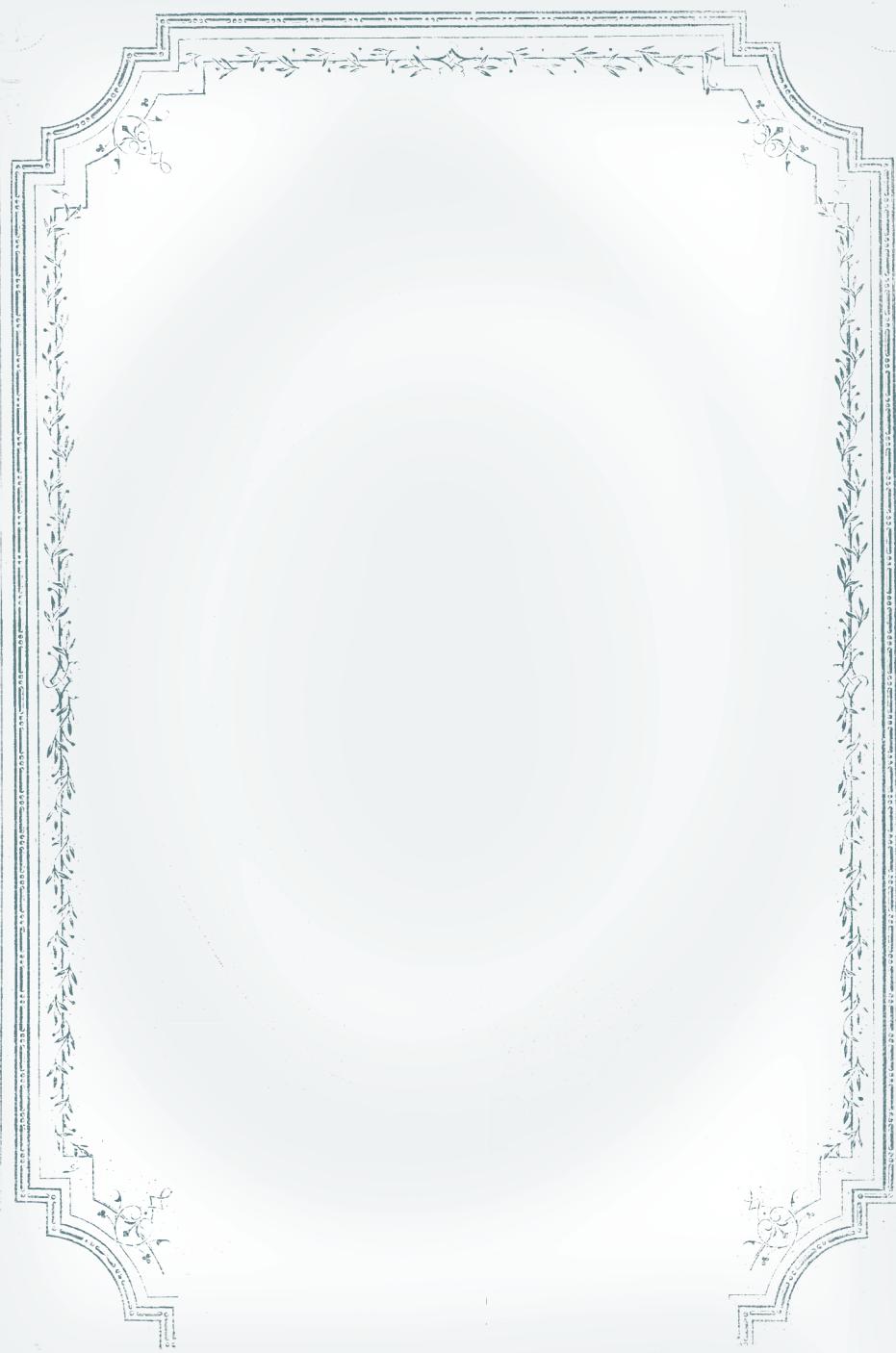


JOB

A STORY OF
UNLIKELY JOY

LISA HARPER



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ABOUT LISA

Rarely are the terms “hilarious storyteller” and “theological scholar” used in the same sentence, much less used to describe the same person, but Lisa Harper is anything but stereotypical. She is a master storyteller, whose writing and speaking overflows with colorful pop culture references that connect the dots between the Bible and modern life.

Her vocational resume includes six years as the director of Focus on the Family’s national women’s ministry, followed by six years as the women’s ministry director at a large church. Her academic resume includes a master’s in theological studies with honors from Covenant Seminary. Now a sought-after Bible teacher and speaker, Lisa was featured on the national Women of Faith tour and speaks at many other large multi-denominational events—such as Christine Caine’s Propel, LifeWay Women events, and Women of Joy conferences—as well as at hundreds of churches all over the world. She’s been on numerous syndicated radio and television programs and was featured on the cover of Today’s Christian Woman.

Lisa has written more than fifteen Bible studies and books, including *The Sacrament of Happy*, *The Gospel of Mark*, *Believing Jesus*, *Malachi*, *Hebrews*, *Stumbling into Grace*, and *A Perfect Mess*. In spite of her credentials, the most noticeable thing about Lisa Harper is her authenticity. “I’m so grateful for the opportunities God’s given me,” Lisa says, “but don’t forget: He often uses donkeys and rocks!”

INTRODUCTION

Missy and I recently came home from another trip to her home village in Nepli, Haiti. (We try to visit a couple of times a year to keep her Haitian roots intact and to share the love of Christ with the community she was born into.) Per usual, the visit prompted several people to ask if it was hard taking her back. My quick and consistent answer: "Yes." Yes, it's very hard to take my precious, healthy daughter back to the place where she almost died—where she was shunned by many villagers when it was revealed that her dear first mama, Marie, died of undiagnosed AIDS and unwittingly infected Missy with HIV, which quickly led to an accompanying tuberculosis infection. It's certainly not easy reestablishing some semblance of real relationship with her extended family members and the caregivers she barely remembers. Nor is it a piece of cake sharing the gospel in an area that's been under the oppressive influence of voodoo for hundreds of years.

Then add in the wilting element of Haiti's weather, which is typically one hundred plus degrees (except for two or three months in the winter when it's still usually at least eighty balmy degrees!), with the humidity levels hovering around the boiling point. Our lodging conditions are usually quite primitive, and both of us inevitably come home to Tennessee with some new skin rash and/or tummy problem. Finally, factor in the reality that every single time we visit her former hometown, we're bombarded by opportunistic people who claim intimacy with Missy—"I'm her first cousin!" "I'm her long-lost uncle!"—in the hopes of exploiting me for money. Frankly, some aspects of our return visits to Haiti aren't just hard—they're messy, emotionally draining, and downright heartbreaking.

But our return visits to Haiti—which, after much wrestling in prayer, I sensed to be an absolute directive from God—are also totally worth it. We've had the pure joy of praying with people there who have committed their lives to Jesus Christ and put their hope in His unconditional love as a direct result of Missy's story. Seeing a child they assumed was dead return thriving and full of joy has been a tangible "show-and-tell" miracle that convinced them of God's redemptive power—of the fact that He really is the Great Physician and Lifegiver. Plus, reconnecting with her

biological family has blessed my kid with a beautifully broad and diverse base of familial affection, as well as a precocious awareness of God's sovereign goodness. It speaks to the theologically-foundational and character-forming premise that His providence will never take us to a place where His grace and presence will not envelop and sustain us!

Our Haitian adventures always remind me of something my friend Sheila Walsh often says, "Some of God's greatest gifts to us are wrapped in boxes that cause our hands to bleed when we open them." And it behooves us to have that truism at the forefront of our hearts and minds as we begin this journey through the Book of Job. Because let's admit it—even for most experienced Bible students, the idea of perusing Job sounds about as pleasant as a root canal. Not only does most of Job's story seem to be a painful slog through a swamp of suffering, it also threatens to press on deeply buried bruises left by unanswered questions regarding why God allows suffering and loss in our own lives. Plus, for those brave, wide-eyed ones in your midst who are dipping their toes into group Bible study for the first time—or the first time in a long time—the whole rigmarole of looking up of verses, filling in blanks, and divulging deep thoughts to relative strangers may appear at first to be about as pleasant as sticking their hands in a blender!

So let's make a pact that our journey through Job is going to be a safe place to engage with God, OK? That we're going to be the kind of judgment-free community where every woman feels comfortable asking questions about Him and free enough to share the highs and especially the lows of her personal story. If we do so, I firmly believe the power and authority of God's Word will ultimately guide us to lean more fully into the arms of Jesus, trusting that His presence will be our constant source of joy no matter how difficult or disappointing or even devastating some chapters of our lives may be. In light of that goal, it's not necessary to choose a single group leader for this study. (I can almost hear the audible gasps from the "type As" reading this!) It may actually be more beneficial to choose a couple of friendly chicks to colead, because that will help make the environment less personality-driven and more participation-driven.

HERE ARE A FEW TIPS TO PROMOTE HEALTHY INVOLVEMENT:

- Establish a no-monopoly chat zone. In other words, encourage everyone to answer at least one question rather than having a single windbag, like myself, answer all of them.
- Allow for "silence cushions" between questions to give introverts time to formulate their thoughts and participate.
- Throw spitballs at anyone who responds to a question with a basic yes-or-no answer. (OK, maybe spitballs are a tad punitive, but encourage real responses!)
- Be quick to listen and slow to give advice or attempt to fix the other chicks' problems in your circle. Just say no to Dr. Phil wannabes!
- Make your best effort to begin and end on time.
- Don't focus on moving through all the material each time you get together. Instead, focus on how your small group tribe is marinating in the truths revealed through Job's journey and as a result, leaning into Jesus.

Furthermore, in an effort to make Job more user-friendly, we've created a study guide

geared toward participation instead of intimidation. We've segmented it into chunks instead of days so you can complete the questions when you have time—when your baby's sleeping, when your husband's glued to a football game, or when you're finally home from work and have changed into a pair of comfy sweatpants. The last thing we want to do is to make Bible study "homework" so cumbersome and time-consuming that your group dwindles down to nonexistent.

You'll also find a few articles interspersed throughout the study. Hopefully this information from friends and scholars will enhance the study and provide helpful guidance.

We've provided a Leader Helps section in the back of this book to help guide you through the study. It includes a tentative agenda for each session, plus discussion questions to help you debrief each week's personal study. Feel free to adapt it according to your group's size and time constraints.

Doodle wildly in the margins! Be as honest as possible in every response. And feel free to throw this study guide on the floor with a dramatic thwack if something I've written steps on one of your emotional bruises—or hug it close to your chest when Jesus whispers endearments to you through one of the passages or paragraphs on the following pages. My sincere hope and fervent prayer is that the King of all kings will woo us closer to Himself than ever before during this season. That Holy Spirit—our Comforter and Counselor—will seal in us a profound assurance of God's absolute *goodness*—that, much like this Old Testament hero named Job, we'll get to the place of spiritual maturity where we too can earnestly proclaim, "Lord, wherever You lead I will gladly follow. Even if we descend to a valley of suffering where I'm stripped of everything that matters to me and everyone I love, still I will trust in You. As long as You don't take Your presence from me I. Will. Be. OK."

Joyfully Yours,

Lisa

SESSION 1 THE UNLIKELY HONOR OF SUFFERING

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

What one thing from the video teaching was new or interesting to you?

Lisa stated that pain is unavoidable. How has pain touched your life or family?

How is pain a conduit for God's glory?

How have you seen God be glorified through your pain or the pain of someone close to you?

The idea of deservedness is not in the economy of God. But why do we so often live like it is? And how does embracing this non-biblical thought affect our faith?

Have you ever struggled with the reality that really bad things happen to really good people, even the people of God? Explain.

1

SUBTRACTING
INSULTS FROM
INJURIES

MY STORY

I wish I could tell you that a profound urge to know how God's presence is always accessible when we're in pain is what compelled me to study Job. But that wasn't it, at least not initially. Nor was this study prompted by a deep longing to connect with Job as an individual. (Frankly some of the physical symptoms he experienced tempt me to scoot my chair away from his because I've never been good with oozing sores and such.) And while I certainly yearn to be more theologically and academically erudite with regard to the entirety of Scripture, I'd be fibbing if I told you that knowledge was my primary motivating factor.

The catalytic incentive that caused me to really delve into this seminal book on human suffering was a homemade version of a Snuggie® Tails™. You know, one of those cheesy, fuzzy blankets that are sewn together at the bottom like a sleeping bag so as to "seal in" the warmth? Yep, a Snuggie. And not a fresh, I-just-ordered-this-from-QVC Snuggie either. But a handmade, grungy, well-worn, prone-to-smell-like-an-active-eight-year-old, oversized sock-blanket that my daughter treasures. She would rather be dragged behind wild horses than sleep without it.

Early one morning, I was standing in front of the stove flipping pancakes. Since we travel quite a bit for work and eat out more often than we should, it's a treat to get to cook in my own kitchen. So I was feeling all content and domestic-goddess-like—with the homemade pancake batter speckled by big, juicy, farm-bought blueberries—and was just about to call for Missy to come downstairs for breakfast when I heard her yelp. The next thing I knew, she was falling head over heels all the way down our long flight of stairs. She slipped on the top tread because she was trying to navigate the steps while

wearing that smelly (I've washed it countless times to no avail.), feet-binding blanket. I ran to try to catch my precious baby girl, but before I could get to her, she hit the bottom landing with a sickening thud. My heart echoed a similar thud as I quickly carried my limp child to the couch, praying silently but frantically, "Oh God, please let her be OK! Please let her be OK!" Somewhere in the back of my mind this indignant thought stubbornly lodged itself: "I can't believe she's overcome severe malnutrition, cholera, tuberculosis, and HIV only to be seriously injured because of that stupid blanket!"

Missy had knocked the wind out of herself, so it took a few seconds for the bloodcurdling scream to erupt. But when it did, our dog Cookie tucked her tail between her legs and scampered out of the room. Of course, by then I'd already shucked her out of that dreadful tube-of-a-blanket and was running my hands over every inch of her little body feeling for broken bones or serious welts as if desperately trying to read braille from her beautiful, brown limbs. I didn't even realize there were tears running down my face until several minutes later, when Missy's sobs slowed to a whimper and she looked up from the cocoon of my arms and asked, "Did I make you sad, Mama?"

To which this foreign, shrill, put-upon-sounding voice tore from my lungs and bellowed, *Why in the world did you try to walk downstairs in that silly blanket, Honey? You could've really hurt yourself! That scared me to death, Missy. Don't ever, ever wear that blanket when you're going up or down stairs, Baby. Now give me that blanket right now because It. Is. Going. In. The. Trash!*

At which point, my darling miracle of an adopted daughter began to sob again. Good night, I may as well have smacked her in the head for getting a concussion.

What's one of the worst responses you've had when someone you love got hurt?

Do you tend to run toward people in pain to offer your help, or hope someone else steps in to nurse their wounds? Explain.

Would you rather tend to a physical wound or an emotional wound?

Are you more comfortable offering comfort to someone you love who's suffering or someone you aren't as close to? Explain.

In his profound book *Where Is God When It Hurts?*, Philip Yancey writes: "Pain is a foolproof producer of guilt, I have learned. We all do things we shouldn't ..." ¹ In other words, when it comes to the waltz of human suffering—whether we're engaged in the dance or simply on the sideline observing—most of us are less than graceful. Sometimes panicked mamas like me berate their precious, post-tumble children. Or, based on the conversation I had with a grieving woman on a flight home from Denver recently, sometimes dear friends deliberately ignore their lifelong besties because they don't know how to respond after the other suffers physical abuse, which leads to a devastating divorce. Or, based on the experience of a friend who lost her teenager in a tragic accident last year, sometimes well-meaning people clumsily attempt to encourage grieving parents by musing out loud that God must've "needed another flower in His garden."



The list goes on and on regarding how our often-abysmal bedside manner adds insult to injury. It's no wonder most people's first choice regarding pain tends to be avoiding it altogether. However, according to Jesus, avoiding pain and hardship in this life is less likely than winning the Powerball®:

I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. You will have suffering in this world. Be courageous! I have conquered the world.

JOHN 16:33, EMPHASIS MINE

Therefore, learning how to better deal with pain and anguish is an absolute necessity.

THE STORY BEHIND JOB'S STORY

One of my favorite *living* theologians (I have platonic crushes on many posthumous dudes including Dr. Charles Spurgeon, Thomas à Kempis, and Andrew Murray.) is Dr. D. A. Carson. He's a seminary professor and author who is often quoted as saying, "A text without a context becomes a pretext for a proof text."² In other words, if we don't take the time to consider the culture and climate of the passage we're perusing and how it fits into the whole inscripturated counsel of God, then we'll likely take that passage out of context. We won't understand it or apply it as God purposed. In my experience, when the Word of God is filtered through the minds, pens, and social media accounts of Christ followers, it's *always* distorted at some level. Truthfully, we can't help it because we have finite, human minds. We won't have the perfect mind of God until we're glorified with Him. Therefore, it behooves us to do as much digging as we can into the history and background of whatever scriptural field from which we're hoping to mine redemptive jewels. So grab your pickaxe and one of those mining helmets with the cute light on top, and let's go!

Read 2 Timothy 2:15. Rewrite this New Testament admonition in your own words.

Read Acts 17:10-11. What do you think Paul meant when he described the Bereans as having a "readiness of the mind" (KJV) when it came to the Scriptures?

Who would you describe as being “like a Berean” in your circle of relationships? How does he or she practically demonstrate a passion to know God better through His Word?

Time Line and Authorship: Job’s story seems to take place in the pre-patriarchal/patriarchal era depicted in Genesis. This is evidenced by Job’s wealth being determined according to the number of animals he owned and the number of servants he employed (Job 1:3). But the author is unknown, and there’s no consensus on the exact date it was written. Jewish rabbinical tradition asserts this book was written in the era of Moses, around 1440 BC. However, others have argued for a Babylonian exile time line—based on the “ongoing suffering” theme of Job—while some modern scholars have argued for dating it much later, well into the Hellenistic period. Therefore, ascribing a composition date for this book is about as imprecise as a game of pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey!

Location: Job’s hometown was a place called Uz (Job 1:1), “the precise location of which is unknown. Many modern scholars place it somewhere in the desert south of the Dead Sea, perhaps near Edom (cf. Lam. 4:21; Jer. 25:20). This seems to associate it with Philistine territory or somewhat to the north, in the same vicinity as the homes of Job’s three friends (Job 2:11). Others follow Josephus and subsequent Christian and Muslim tradition in placing Uz at Hauron, south of Damascus (possibly the land settled by Aram’s son, Gen. 10:23).”³ I find it interesting that Job was attacked by the “Sabeans” (Job 1:15), who came from Saba in southern Arabia—which is now the country of Yemen—as well as the “Chaldeans” (Job 1:17), who came from Chaldea in southern Mesopotamia—which now includes Iran, Syria, and Turkey. So while we can’t pinpoint Job’s exact location on GPS, we can safely say his story took place in the Middle East.

Biblical Classification: Rabbis and students of the Hebrew Bible put Job in a small sub-section of books classified as wisdom literature, which includes Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Their reason for the inclusion of Job is its didactic/instructive content regarding “right living” and/or “right thinking.”⁴ However, Job indirectly confronts the underlying theme of retribution in Proverbs, which is essentially the idea that *good*

morals lead to a prosperous life, and bad morals lead to folly and destruction. Which just might be why many contemporary Christian commentators put the Book of Job in a class by itself, viewing him as more of an individual sport athlete than a team player in the proverbial Olympics of Scripture!

The *Holman Concise Bible Commentary* says it like this:

Job is in many ways like other writings in the Bible and yet is in a class by itself.

Some of the types of biblical material found in Job follow:

Laments: Job repeatedly bewailed what had befallen him (Job 3:1-26; 6:2-7; 10:1-12).

Hymns of Praise: Job often praised God for His power and righteousness (Job 5:9-16 and 26:5-14).

Proverbs: Pithy statements of wisdom and metaphor appear (Job 5:2, 6:5-6, 28:28).

Prophetic Speech: The friends sometimes claimed to have had prophetic experiences, and they preached as the prophets did (Job 4:12-14; 11:13-20; 32:8).

Wisdom Poems: Job has several lengthy poems on the value of wisdom and right behavior (Job 8:11-22; 28).

Numeric Sayings: (Job 5:19)

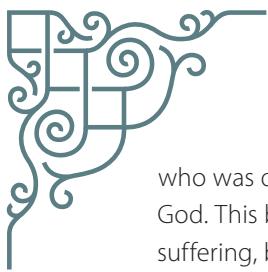
Reflective Questioning: Job sometimes bluntly challenges conventional wisdom (Job 21:17-19).

Apocalyptic: Job has some features in common with books like Daniel and Revelation. The earthly struggle is part of a heavenly conflict between God and Satan (Job 1-2). Human foes (Job's wife and three friends) tempt the believer to abandon his perseverance. But faithful endurance leads to triumph and blessings (Job 42).

The Book of Job draws on many types of literature to set forth its message, but it does not belong to any one of these categories. It must be interpreted as unique both in literary type and message. Job is not a conventional book.⁵

Literary Structure: The significant variance of Job's narrative structure (from prose to dialogue) and emotional tone (Job digresses from accepting his fate in the prologue to arguing with God in the middle, speech-oriented section.) has led many Old Testament scholars to surmise that the Book of Job was revised over a period of time.⁶ It eventually became a unified literary work, which was ultimately canonized into Holy Writ.

Message and Purpose: Despite the complex theme, unusual literary structure, and some opaque Hebraic terminology, Job is an invaluable book to study and apply to both our everyday lives and theological scaffolding. It's a true story about a real person



who was dealt one of the worst hands in history and yet never lost his faith in a good God. This book not only gives us practical advice for how to better deal with pain and suffering, but when read in the context of redemptive history, it's a life-changing literary harbinger pointing us to the perfect sufficiency and salvific miracle found in the cross of Christ! Renowned Australian professor and theologian Dr. Francis Andersen clearly surmises Job's value: "That the Lord himself has embraced and absorbed the undeserved consequences of all evil is the final answer to Job and to all the Jobs of humanity."⁷

What passage or book of the Bible has most consistently and effectively pointed you to the unconditional, sacrificial love of Jesus? How?

If you were only allowed to read one book of the Bible for the rest of your life, what would it be? Why?

JOB'S STORY

As I mentioned in the opening video teaching session, Job's story falls into three clear sections:

Chapters 1–2: A prose prologue that describes earthly and heavenly realms and realities as juxtaposed.⁸ A sort of divine competition between good and evil begins with God as the protagonist and Satan as the antagonist.⁹

Chapters 3–42:6: An epic poem—which includes distinct speeches given by Job, his four less-than-helpful friends (Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Elihu), and ultimately God Himself.¹⁰

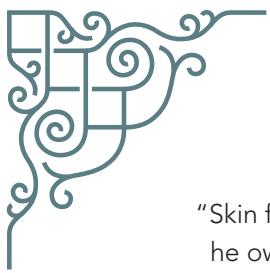
Chapter 42:7–14: A prose epilogue, which depicts Job as a man restored, liberated, at peace, and choosing to be in an obedient, worshipful relationship with God, his Creator Redeemer.¹¹

For a moment, let's explore the last half of the prologue. There we find God, the Creator of the universe, and Satan, the cruel adversary and accuser of humanity, having a second confrontational conversation. The prideful lizard grudgingly acknowledges that Job hasn't yet lost his integrity despite losing his wealth and children. But as we read further, we can almost *hear* the manipulative whine in Satan's tone when he argues that if God would only allow him to afflict Job's flesh and bones, which was previously *not* permitted (1:12), Job's integrity would disappear faster than a mouse at a cat convention!

One day the sons of God came again to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came with them to present himself before the LORD. The LORD asked Satan, "Where have you come from?"

"From roaming through the earth," Satan answered him, "and walking around on it."

Then the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? No one else on earth is like him, a man of perfect integrity, who fears God and turns away from evil. He still retains his integrity, even though you incited me against him, to destroy him for no good reason."



"Skin for skin!" Satan answered the LORD. "A man will give up everything he owns in exchange for his life. But stretch out your hand and strike his flesh and bones, and he will surely curse you to your face."

"Very well," the LORD told Satan, "he is in your power; only spare his life." So Satan left the LORD's presence and infected Job with terrible boils from the soles of his feet to the top of his head. Then Job took a piece of broken pottery to scrape himself while he sat among the ashes.

JOB 2:1-8

KEY POINTS TO PONDER IN JOB'S STORY

For me, the most difficult concept in Job 2, if not the entire book, is the fact that God allows Satan to further afflict Job. Good night, the poor fellow has already presided over the funerals of all *ten* of his children and most of his team of employees, plus he's faced foreclosure on his estate. It's almost impossible to imagine the depth of his grief in light of those huge, horrific losses. Now that pain is compounded by adding terribly painful, infected, head-to-toe, open sores to his inventory of agony.

God's sovereignty over absolutely *everything* in the world, including allowing the devil to devastate Job beyond what seems humanly bearable, begs the age-old question we talked about in the first video teaching session: *If God is truly good, why does He allow such bad things to happen to us?* I mean, how in the world could a compassionate Creator hand one of His beloved created beings over to that wicked dragon—the very same snake the apostle John said comes only to steal from us, kill us, and destroy us (John 10:10)? I don't begin to have the wisdom to conclusively answer the question of why God allows suffering. However, over the years, I have constructed an internal theological framework by which to consider God's allowance of suffering so that I don't lose my hope in the ditch of despair, sully my soul in the mud of moralism, trade my peace for the anguish of over-analysis, or harden my heart in the cement of cynicism.

Here's the deal: *Despite how incredibly harsh pain appears from our perspectives, God only gives Satan enough rope to hang himself. It's never enough to drag us away from God's presence.*

At the end of my freshman year in high school, my stepfather gave me a choice; he said if I chose to stay at Lake Brantley High School, I would no longer be allowed to participate in extracurricular activities such as student government, social clubs, or sports. He was the principal at the middle school next door, and he wanted me to ride home with him as soon as he got off work. He was not willing to wait around for me to be finished with track practice or a Fellowship of Christian Athletes meeting. And he flatly refused to drive twenty-five miles round trip after hours to pick me up from anything sports- or social-related.

However, he bargained, if I agreed to transfer to Seminole High School, the secondary school in our town, I could participate in whatever clubs or sports I wanted to because it was close enough for me to ride my bike to and from activities. Mom tried to change his mind after we met with a much less-than-hospitable staff member at Seminole, whose grammar was even more atrocious than his lack of civility. She became concerned about the school's lackluster academic standards, not to mention the rampant drug use, racial

tension, and campus violence that was often reported in the local news. Despite the fact that mom graduated from Seminole High School and had met my stepfather, Dad Angel, there thirty years earlier, her concern for my safety and college preparation trumped any nostalgic thoughts of me attending her alma mater.

But Dad Angel wouldn't budge. So in August of 1978, I left all my friends and a sparkling clean, recently built school with a bevy of amenities to attend a very old school with zero modern amenities and a constant police presence. The first few days were definitely dicey. I was chased more than once by a gang leader who wanted to rough me up to bolster his reputation as the number one bully. A girl hurled an expletive at me and threatened to beat me up because her boyfriend gave me directions to the driver's ed class. And my preppy clothes made me a laughingstock at the lockers between classes. But soon enough, I befriended the bully after his sister told him that she and I were friends in elementary school. I learned to avoid boys who were attached to mean, possessive girls who were prone to wearing tube tops in public. And I exchanged khakis and top-siders for Levi's® and flip-flops.

More importantly, I learned to love people who didn't look like me or live in my neighborhood. I learned that skin color, zip codes, and test scores were petty details and absolutely useless qualifiers for real relationships. I learned to make do with hand-me-down uniforms, generously cracked tennis courts, sagging nets, and a gym without air-conditioning in the intense heat and sticky humidity of Central Florida. I learned how to ask better questions in class and check out more books from the library. I learned how to engage through dialogue instead of distancing through diatribe. I learned how to gladly share microscopes and dissecting equipment in an antiquated laboratory under the guidance of an awesome anatomy teacher. I learned how to be a team player and cheer even louder from the bench than I did on the court.

Seminole High School is where I learned that entitlement is the archenemy of creativity, passion, and joy. It's where I learned that building something by the sweat of your brow is a lot more rewarding than having it handed to you. It's where I learned to lead Bible studies with my best friend Cindy. It's where we first studied the theme of adoption in the Bible. It's where we made a solemn promise after a Fellowship of Christian Athletes meeting that we'd adopt hard-to-place kids when we grew up—which means it's also where I unwittingly began the journey of becoming Missy's mama, thirty years before her first mama died from AIDS in a small village in Haiti.

The greatest theological minds in the history of Christendom haven't been able to conclusively answer the question of why our Redeemer allows suffering to happen, so



you'd better bet I can't. But I do have enough life experience to believe that if we trust that our God *is good* and He *does good*—even when life is really bad—hardship won't make us bitter; it will actually make us better. It won't break us; it will make us. Of course, changing high schools can only be defined as a "hardship" in the narcissistic milieu of adolescence. It would barely register as a blip on the radar of real pain. But the truism of God's absolute goodness has followed me *all* of my days, including times of much greater grief—my parents' acrimonious divorce, sexual abuse as a child, rape in college, multiple abusive and toxic relationships as a young adult, losing both of my fathers, a heartbreak failed adoption at the eleventh hour, and many other seasons of suffering.

Now that I'm in my fifties, it's safe to say I've lived more life than I have life left to live. And when I look back over my entire story thus far, I can honestly tell you I have never seen God's back. Mind you, there are still lots of things I don't understand, and there have been losses I almost couldn't bear. But through it all, I have never experienced His absence. I don't know *why* God allows His children to suffer, but I do know that He always makes Himself accessible to us *when* we ache.

Read Psalm 34:18. How would you synopsize this biblical promise into a no-more-than-five-words movie title?

KEY CHARACTER IN JOB'S STORY

His wife said to him, "Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die!"

"You speak as a foolish woman speaks," he told her.
"Should we accept only good from God and not adversity?
Throughout all this Job did not sin in what he said.

JOB 2:9-10

What would you guess to be the longest period of time you've ever gone without "sinning in what you said"?

Where do you think your close friends and family members would rate you on the following scale, with 1 being *slow to speak negative thoughts and feelings* and 10 being *quick to verbalize your malcontent and misery*?

Slow to Speak

Quick to Verbalize

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Explain the reason for your score

Read Proverbs 10:19. What's the takeaway or application of this verse?

I know it's uncool to throw another sister under the bus, but I think it's obvious why Satan didn't kill Job's wife along with his kids—she was more of an asset to the lizard alive than dead! Her nasty comment in Job 2:9, which certainly sounds like she's taunting her own husband to curse God and die, has prompted saints through the ages to vilify her. Saint Augustine called her *diaboli adjutrix* (which in Latin means *devil's advocate*), Saint John Chrysostom labeled her "the devil's best scourge," and John Calvin castigates her as *organum Satani* (which in Latin means *the embodiment of Satan*).¹² But when you consider her excruciating circumstances, it's hard not to agree with pastor and author Stuart Briscoe (whose wife Jill is one of the wisest, loveliest, and most humble Bible teachers I've ever had the privilege of listening to) who charitably insists, "She deserves a fairer judgment."¹³

To be fair, Mrs. Job had more than enough reasons to rail against God. Those seven sons and three daughters were her children too. Her grief was surely at least as deep as Job's. Her mother's heart had been shattered into a million, jagged pieces, which had sheared off her joy and every bit of faith she had in the goodness of Yahweh. Prior to her outburst, she was likely still in a state of shock, trudging in a slow circle around town like a zombie. Then perhaps one day—not long after the day of disaster—while making her sad loop, she looked up to see her husband sprawled on top of the town trash dump in the smoldering ashes of everyone's discarded newspapers and coffee grinds, covered with oozing, infected ulcers. It probably took a minute for her foggy mind to comprehend the scene she had stumbled upon. But when the picture finally came into focus, she realized he was scraping himself with the edge of a plate she'd thrown against the kitchen wall of their tiny rental house in despair. At that point, Mrs. Job just flat lost it.

If we're being honest, I bet most of us can identify with her. My sweet daughter could actually give you recent times and dates when I've channeled a little Lady Job. In fact, just this week I was so physically and emotionally depleted from working and traveling way too much while battling the flu, that when she mildly misbehaved, I bellowed, "Melissa, I



have had it! I will not tolerate this kind of disobedience anymore!" To say I overreacted would be putting my bad behavior mildly. So yeah, I can absolutely understand Mrs. Job's ugly retort. I'm not saying it's OK or innocuous—especially the cussing God part—but given her very bad, horrible, no good string of days, the eruption makes total sense. And I think Job had grace for her heretical fury too. Unlike ancient church fathers, he didn't call her the devil's personal assistant or a wicked hussy. He simply said she was being foolish. And who knows but what he pulled her into his bleeding arms when he said it, because he of all people knew the raw grief that incited her rage. Then he articulated the most brilliant, sound theological position one could ever assume in the midst of suffering: "*Should we accept only good from God and not adversity?*"

And that, ladies and gentleman, is called serving dessert first, because learning to accept everything that sifts through the sovereignty of God's hands is the main takeaway of Job! It is truly the crux of this story and the unquenchable pilot light of personal joy.

YOUR STORY

What's the most painful thing you experienced as a child?

What's the most painful thing you experienced as an adolescent or young adult?

What's the most painful thing you've experienced recently?

How do you think those experiences have shaped or altered your view of God?

In C. S. Lewis's classic book, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, there's a wonderful scene in which Mr. Beaver is talking about Aslan the Lion (the Christ figure in this awesome allegorical tale) with Susan, a young girl. Their conversation goes like this: "Aslan is a lion—the Lion, the great Lion." 'Ooh!' said Susan. 'I'd thought he was a man. Is he—quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.' ... 'Safe?' said Mr. Beaver ... 'Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you.'¹⁴

How do you reconcile the idea that our Savior isn't safe but He's good with the psalmist's declaration that God is his safe refuge in Psalm 91:2?

If you could fashion God to be either only safe or only good, which would you choose? Explain.

Do you feel like the pain you've experienced in life has put distance between you and God or prompted you to lean into Him more fully?



Read Psalm 139:23-24. Spend a few moments prayerfully meditating on these verses, and then list any way you may have offended or grieved God (v. 24) in how you've handled hardship.

In light of that passage, has the Holy Spirit convicted you of any patterns, habits, or behaviors that need to change regarding how you might react to hardship in the future? If so, what changes are you committed to make?

THE MESSAGE AND PURPOSE OF JOB

BY E. RAY CLENDENEN

What do we mean when we say we are looking for the message and purpose of the Book of Job? Are we asking, "What did Job learn from his experience?" If so, then the answer would have to come from God's speeches in Job 38–41, and it would deal with the greatness of God's wisdom and power. But Job never knew the rest of the story; he never knew about the conversation between God and Satan in the prologue. The story of Job is bigger than the story of Job's experience. The message and purpose of the Book of Job must include the whole book: the prologue, dialogues, and epilogue. The message and purpose are more than what Job learned, although that must be included.

EXPLANATIONS

Chrysostom (ca. AD 347-407), relying solely on the prologue, "found in Job a model of self-denial for those struggling with the devil, and his perseverance under trial was therefore to be imitated."¹⁵ On the other hand, Jerome (ca. AD 347-419) saw the book's message in Job's testimonies to his faith in the coming Redeemer and in the resurrection (19:25-27).¹⁶

A common view is that the purpose behind the story of Job is to refute the principle of retribution in this life, which is clearly a dogma Job's companions held. The retribution principle claims that righteousness always brings prosperity and happiness, whereas wickedness brings misery. Even Job himself believed (as many do today) that the innocent should not experience great suffering; this should rather be reserved for the wicked who thumb their noses at God. The book certainly overturns this dogma. But is this the primary message?

This view does not seem to do justice to all the parts of the book—for example, God's speeches in Job 38–41.

Another potential purpose for the book is to resolve the problem of suffering or of innocent suffering. Job did wrestle with this issue and asked about it, but he never received an answer. The answer the reader gains from the prologue surely applies only in Job's case. The book does not answer the problem of suffering.

Another explanation about the book's message and purpose is that the story shows that God will show up in the midst of suffering and comfort the sufferer. "[T]hough men must suffer in the dark, their very suffering may be an enrichment if in it they know the presence of God, who is ever ready to dwell with him who is of a crushed ... and humble spirit."¹⁷ Although true in some sense, this is not the book's message. Sufferers cannot expect a revelation of God

like Job received. God's revelation did not bring Job comfort; it caused him to repent. Besides, this solution fails to take into account the prologue and epilogue.

LESSONS

What may we learn from the Book of Job if we consider all its parts? First, we observe in the prologue that God is the One who points the finger at Job because he clearly delights in the Lord. Three times the prologue states Job was a man of integrity (1:8; 2:3, HCSB). The Hebrew word translated "integrity" (*yashar*) can refer to something straight or level or that conforms to a standard. When speaking of a person, *yashar* often translates into English as "upright" and refers to someone (1) whose way of life conforms to what is right and (2) who follows the Lord's ways, His ethical and moral standards of behavior. Three times the story says Job feared God and turned away from evil (1:8; 2:3). One who fears God seeks to live in accordance with His will, and thus to turn away from behavior that would be contrary to that will.

But Satan raised an important issue. Why did Job behave uprightly? Was it so God would bless him with material prosperity, a large family, and good health? Or did Job live with integrity because he delighted in the Lord and His ways? With Job, Satan was just following what he had done as the serpent in the garden—questioning God's character and trying to ruin His worshipers.¹⁸ According to the prologue in Job, Satan failed this time. Job responded, "Should we accept only good from God and not adversity?" And the narrator adds that

"throughout all this Job did not sin in what he said" (2:10; see 42:7-9, HCSB).

Second, we observe in the dialogue the rest of the story, but this is much messier. John Walton, an Old Testament scholar, has observed that throughout Job's dialogue with his four companions, three claims were on the table: the retribution principle (Job was being punished for sin), Job's righteousness, and God's justice.¹⁹ Representing ancient pagan wisdom, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar advocated the retribution principle, accepted God's justice, but rejected Job's righteousness. Job advocated his righteousness, accepted the retribution principle, and rejected God's justice. Representing Israelite wisdom, Elihu (who had a Hebrew name) advocated God's justice, accepted the retribution principle, but rejected Job's claims of righteousness as arrogance. Suffering, Elihu claimed, had a disciplinary and preventative purpose.

Job's first three companions wanted him to manipulate God by a tactic of appeasement: Job should confess to a long list of sins until he came to the one (or more) that had gotten him into such trouble. Then God would have to forgive Job and bless him again. Job, being a man of integrity, refused to confess to sins he had not committed. He considered his innocence more important than restored blessings (27:1-6). Furthermore, Job reminisced about his former life and showed that what he missed most was not his material blessings but the opportunity to pursue righteousness in the public square (ch. 29). Clearly Satan's charge that Job

served God in return for blessings was false.²⁰ Furthermore, as harsh as Job's cries of injustice were at times (e.g., 9:21-24; 10:13-17; 12:13-25), he continued to cry out in his pain to God. He never turned his back on God, but continued to pursue Him, considering God his only hope.²¹ (See 13:22-24; 16:19-21; 19:27; 31:35-37.)

When God spoke (chaps. 38-41), He neither defended Himself against Job's charges nor explained Job's suffering. To do so would mean that faith must be based on understanding rather than on knowing the God who created all things and maintains order in the cosmos. God demonstrated to Job that He is worthy of man's delighting in Him. Job thus laid aside all of his earlier claims and submitted in faith to the God who rules with wisdom, power, and grace. God demonstrated His grace by restoring prosperity to His servant in whom He took delight. And Job came to know God better than he ever had before. He is "the Rock—His work is perfect; all His ways are entirely just. A faithful God, without prejudice, He is righteous and true" (Deut. 32:4, HCSB).

