

Job Passes the Test
Job 1–2

Let's read Job chapters 1 and 2. *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. He 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.*

His sons used to hold feasts in their homes on their birthdays, and they would invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. When a period of feasting had run its course, Job would make arrangements for them to be purified. Early in the morning he would sacrifice a burnt offering for each of them, thinking, "Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts." This was Job's regular custom.

One day the angels came to present themselves before the Lord, and the Accuser also came with them. The Lord said to the Accuser, "Where have you come from?" The Accuser answered the Lord, "From roaming throughout the earth, going back and forth on it." Then the Lord said to the Accuser, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil." "Does Job fear God for nothing?" the Accuser replied. "Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. But now stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face." The Lord said to the Accuser, "Very well, then, everything he has is in your power, but on the man himself do not lay a finger." Then the Accuser went out from the presence of the Lord.

One day when Job's sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother's house, a messenger came to Job and said, "The oxen were plowing and the donkeys were grazing nearby, and the Sabeans attacked and made off with them. They put the servants to the sword, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!" While he was still speaking, another messenger came and said, "The fire of God fell from the heavens and burned up the sheep and the servants, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!"

While he was still speaking, another messenger came and said, "The Chaldeans formed three raiding parties and swept down on your camels and made off with them. They put the servants to the sword, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!" While he was still speaking, yet another messenger came and said, "Your sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother's house, when suddenly a mighty wind swept in from the desert and struck the four corners of the house. It collapsed on them and they are dead, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!"

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 will 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.

On another day the angels came to present themselves before the Lord, and the Accuser also came with them to present himself before him. And the Lord said to the Accuser, “Where have you come from?” The Accuser answered the Lord, “From roaming throughout the earth, going back and forth on it.” Then the Lord said to the Accuser, “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil. And he still maintains his integrity, though you incited me against him to ruin him without any reason.” “Skin for skin!” The Accuser replied. “A man will give all he has for his own life. But now stretch out your hand and strike his flesh and bones, and he will surely curse you to your face.” The Lord said to the Accuser, “Very well, then, he is in your hands; but you must spare his life.”

So the Accuser went out from the presence of the Lord and afflicted Job with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head. Then Job took a piece of broken pottery and scraped himself with it as he sat among the ashes. His wife said to him, “Are you still maintaining your integrity? Curse God and die!” He replied, “You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?” In all this, Job did not sin in what he said.

When Job’s three friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite, heard about all the troubles that had come upon him, they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and comfort him. When they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him; they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads. Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was.

A Terrible Story

Job 1–2 hit us like a hammer. This is an awful story, and it clobbers us. One tragedy after another happen to a very good man. God himself is somehow a partner in these tragedies, even though God knows Job is an exceptionally good man. Can this world really be this unfair?

What is more, these troubles that happened to righteous Job were all listed in Deuteronomy as God’s curses for Israel’s disobedience. Job was not disobedient, yet he had the severe troubles of those who were unfaithful to God, those who rebelled against God.

Job 1 (vv14–15) says the Sabeans took Job’s oxen and donkeys. In Deuteronomy 28 (v31) Moses said, if you turn away from God, “your donkey will be taken from you and not returned. Your sheep will be given to your enemies and no one will rescue them.”

In Job 1 (v16), the fire of God fell from the heavens and burned up Job’s sheep and the servants. In Deuteronomy 29 (v23), Moses said, “The land will become a burning waste of salt and sulphur ... It will be like the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.”

In Job 1 (v17), the Chaldeans took Job’s camels and killed his servants. Deuteronomy 28 already covered this: “Your donkey will be taken from you and not returned. Your sheep will be given to your enemies and no one will rescue them.”

In Job 1 (vv18–19), a mighty wind struck the house his children were in, and Job’s ten children were all killed. Deuteronomy 28 (v41) we read that “You will have sons and daughters, but you will not keep them.”

In Job 2 (v7), the Accuser went out from the presence of the LORD and afflicted Job with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head.” Deuteronomy 28 (v35) says, “The LORD will afflict you with painful boils that cannot be cured, spreading from the soles of your feet to the crown of your head.” The writer of Job quotes that line from Deuteronomy.

People, this connection to Deuteronomy 28 is deliberate. The writer of Job wants us to be thinking about the curses in Deuteronomy 28 when we read Job 1–2. The Jews read from the Law of Moses every Sabbath; they did not need these things pointed out to them the way I’ve done here. Things happen to Job that God says are meant for those who rebel against God. This makes the story even more puzzling and distressing, and it is written to do that.

Unconventional Wisdom

Job is one of the Bible’s books that we call unconventional wisdom. The normal teaching of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, is that God will bless those who serve him and God will bring trouble on those who rebel against him.

Two Old Testament writings warn us that life can look very different. Ecclesiastes and especially Job are unconventional wisdom. These two books teach us that living right does not promise us a trouble free life. The psalms of lament also show us this, because in these psalms, God’s children are suffering and complain to God that it should not be like that. In the New Testament, Jesus our Lord is a sinless person, God’s much-loved Son, and he suffered much and was humiliated and killed. That’s unconventional wisdom.

Suffering in the Bible

No religious book in the world, and no religion in the world, takes human suffering as seriously as the Bible does. No other book comes close. Our God takes all human pain and suffering and distress seriously. It is a big topic in the Bible. In many places, the Bible gives voice to righteous people who suffer. The Bible records their pain and distress and disappointment with God.

Why do bad things happen to good people? The Bible gives different explanations, depending on the situation. There is no one explanation the Bible always uses. When none of these work for us, we blame it on the Fall. The first couple sinned and brought pain on themselves and us all. The rest of the Bible does not use that explanation.

The book of Job does not use any of our favorite explanations. The closest God gets to answering is his two storm speeches in Job 38–41. But in those speeches, God does not answer any questions. He only asks Job questions that Job cannot answer. See what you can learn from the two speeches of God. Those speeches are God’s response.

The Accuser

In most Bibles the Accuser is called “Satan,” which is a name. In the New Testament the devil is called Satan, but in Job it is not a name. It’s just “the Accuser.” In Job 1–2, the Accuser brings to God’s attention a situation that ought to be tested. The thing about Job is that there’s nothing in his life that he could be accused about. He’s a righteous man who shuns evil.

So the Accuser attacks Job’s motive. He says Job only serves God for selfish reasons, and so Job gets tested, and severely. I’m not going to make too much of the Accuser as the cause of Job’s suffering, because the book of Job does not make much of the Accuser. After Job 1–2, in all the speeches including God’s speeches at the end, no one mentions the Accuser. Everyone assumes that Job’s troubles are God’s doing, and God assumes that as well.

Even in Job 1–2, it’s not clear who causes Job’s troubles. In 1:11, the Accuser says to God, “**you** stretch out **your** hand, God, and strike everything he has, and he will curse you.” The Accuser wants God to do it. Then God says to the Accuser, “all he has is in **your** power.”

Then the fire of God from the heavens burned up Job’s sheep and his servants. The fire of God is from God. When the Accuser comes before God in Job 2, God says to the Accuser, “You incited **me** against him to ruin him without any reason.” God agrees that he has ruined Job.

Then the Accuser says, “Stretch out **your** hand against his flesh and bones, and he will curse you.” God says, “Very well, he’s in **your** hands, but you must spare his life.” So the Accuser afflicted Job with painful sores.

So the cause of the troubles in Job 1–2 is mixed. But when Job responds to his troubles, he speaks only about God. “The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away, may the name of the LORD be praised.” And at the end, “Shall we accept good from God and not trouble?” So for Job this is from God alone, and the rest of the book assumes that.

My brothers and sisters, this is an uncomfortable truth. Does God actually give and also take away? Does God himself bring both good and trouble to us?

I was taught that God allows troubles to come to his people but he does not cause them. But there are so many places in the Bible that tell God to his face what painful distressing things he has brought on his people, and God never corrects that. It is the right way to talk to God when we are in distress. Even our Lord's suffering was by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge. Must he treat us better than his own Son? It is a hard teaching.

There is a mystery here that I do not understand. I don't think the Bible has a final answer for why these things happen. Why did God give the Accuser the time of day at all? I don't know.

Job's Test: The Dark plan of Suffering

Job's sufferings had a dark purpose: sufferings would cause Job to turn away from God. Instead of fearing and serving God, he would curse God and turn away from God. Job was a hero, he is a hero, because he would not do that. He would not let his troubles turn him away from God. The Accuser did not think Job had that kind of loyalty and faithfulness to God, but he did. Job still blessed God, and he never stopped seeking God. Job felt completely abandoned by God, he felt like God had become his enemy and wanted to destroy him, but Job kept seeking God.

In trouble, we don't need to act happy and victorious. We don't need to say it's all fine when it's not. We can tell God that he's ruining us and acting like our enemy, but let's not turn away. James 5:11 *"We count those blessed who persevered. You have heard of the perseverance of Job, and have seen the outcome of the Lord's dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful."* All God asks of us is that we not turn away from him. He'll do the rest.

At the end of his life, Paul wrote: *"I fought the fight, I ran the race, I kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing"* (2 Tim 4).

"I fought the fight, I ran the race, I kept the faith." Paul does not say anything about all his preaching and his converts and all the churches he started and the letters he wrote.

"I kept the faith." He sounds like Job, that sounds like the endurance of Job. We can easily imagine that it was hard for Job to keep the faith, but it's hard to imagine Paul having trouble with that. But at the end of his life Paul says, with relief and a sense of triumph, I kept the faith.

Two Things to Learn

(1) Bad things happen to people who are faithful servants of God, and they did nothing to bring it on themselves. Get that straight. They did not bring this on themselves. Don't accuse others who have troubles. We feel safer if we persuade ourselves that others brought their troubles on themselves. Don't do that. Job did not bring this on himself. Don't accuse yourself, either. Don't tell yourself, "I must have done something wrong. If only I had done this or that. If only I had *not* done this or that." Job did not bring this on himself, not at all.

(2) In this story, Job’s troubles and pain are designed to turn him away from God. God hopes that we will respond as Job did. Job continued to fear God and shun evil. In his great distress, Job did not turn against God. Job fought the fight to keep his faith. That’s what God hopes we will do.

God will accomplish other things in our lives through our troubles, but he’s not asking us to figure it out. Whatever God wants to do, all he needs from us is to keep the faith. Job’s test was a pass/fail kind of test. One either passes or one fails, that’s all. If we keep the faith, we’ve passed, we’ve conquered, and a crown of glory is waiting for us. The Lord himself will crown us. Amen.

PRAYER: Father, your word tells us in our afflictions that we can still have hope. It says that because of your great love, we are not consumed. Your compassions never fail. They are new every morning. Your faithfulness is great. We say to ourselves, “the Lord is my portion, I will wait for him.” We hope in you, we wait for you. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the Lord direct your hearts into God’s love and into Christ’s perseverance. Amen. Go in God’s peace to love and serve the Lord.