

Preaching on Job

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Introduction

Job is an important book in the Bible. It is one of the longest (42 chapters), and deals with an important subject, namely suffering. It is, however, difficult to preach on.¹ This is partly because of its length, and partly because much of it is in poetry, the precise meaning of which is sometimes obscure.² A further difficulty is that the main lessons it teaches do not come out until the end. Preachers accordingly rarely speak on it, except for Job's statement made famous by Handel's aria, 'I know that my Redeemer liveth'.

Daniel Estes says that, to preach on Job properly, one needs first to study it line by line in detail.³ Many ministers, however, would have difficulty finding the time to do this. He further suggests that a preacher tells his congregation to read through Job before he starts to preach on it, a task some members would find difficult.

Here I present a way of preaching on Job that gets over these difficulties. This involves going right through Job in a single sermon, quoting from it at various points, and drawing out lessons from it at the end. Going through it in one sermon gets round the problem of the main lessons appearing only at the end. Quotations may be from any version, but I have based mine here on the literal translation of Jay Green.⁴ On difficult points, I have consulted the technical commentaries of Driver and Gray,⁵ and David Clines.⁶

Exposition

Who Job was (1:1–5)

The book of Job introduces us to him. It describes him as a righteous man whom God had greatly prospered:

¹There was a man in the land of Uz [east of the Jordan] whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, fearing God and turning away from evil. ²There were born to him seven sons and three daughters. ³His possessions were seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five thousand yoke of oxen, five hundred female donkeys, and very many servants, so that that man was greater than all the sons of the east.

What happened to him (1:6–2:10)

The book of Job goes on to describe how Satan challenged God about Job and was allowed to put him to the test:

¹ Daniel J. Estes, 'Communicating the Book of Job in the Twenty-first Century,' *Themelios* 40 (2015), 243–52.

² For example, 19:26 literally reads: 'And after my skin (masc.), they flay this (fem.), yet from my flesh, I shall/would (imperf.) see God.'

³ Estes, 'Communicating the Book of Job'.

⁴ Jay Green (ed.), *The Interlinear Hebrew/Greek English Bible*, Vol. 2 (Wilmington, Delaware: Associated Publishers & Authors, 1976).

⁵ Samuel Rolles Driver and George Buchanan Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Job* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1921).

⁶ David J.A. Clines, *Job 1–20*, Word Biblical Commentary [WBC] Vol. 17 (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1989), *Job 21–37*, WBC Vol. 18A (Nashville, Tennessee: Nelson, 2006), *Job 38–42*, WBC Vol. 18B (Nelson, 2011) (all republished by Zondervan, Nashville, 2015).

⁶Now came a day when the sons of God [angels?] came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them. ⁷The LORD said to Satan, ‘From where have you come?’ Satan answered the LORD and said, ‘From roving on the earth, and from walking back and forth on it.’ ⁸And the LORD said to Satan, ‘Have you directed your attention to my servant Job? For there is no one like him on the earth, a man blameless and upright, fearing God and turning away from evil.’ ⁹Then Satan answered the LORD and said, ‘Does Job fear God for nothing?’ ¹⁰Have you not put a hedge around him, and his house, and all his estate? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. ¹¹But surely, put out your hand now and touch all that is his [and see] if he will not curse* you to your face.’ ¹²And the LORD said to Satan, ‘Behold, all that is his is in your hand. Only on him do not put out your hand.’ So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD.

*Heb. *bārak*, ‘bless’, here used in a bad sense.

Satan then proceeded to take everything away from Job (1:13–19). Job, however, responded to this well:

²⁰Then Job rose up, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell down on the ground and worshipped. ²¹He said, ‘Naked I came out of the womb of my mother, and naked I shall return there [the ‘womb’ of the grave]. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.’ ²²In all this, Job did not sin, nor charge God with wrong.

This scenario is then repeated (2:1–8). Satan says to God that Job is responding well because he still has his health: ‘Take this away and he will curse you to your face.’ So God allows Satan to afflict Job with painful sores from his head to his feet.

Again Job responds well, at least to start with (2:9–10).

Job’s friends (2:11–13)

The book of Job now introduces us to his friends:

¹¹Now three friends of Job heard of all this evil that had come upon him, and they came each one from his own place: Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. They met together to come to console him and to comfort him. ¹²When they lifted up their eyes from afar and did not recognize him, they lifted up their voice and wept. Each one tore his robe, and they sprinkled dust on their heads towards the heavens. ¹³And they sat down with him on the ground seven days and seven nights. No one spoke to him a word, for they saw that his suffering was very great.

Job expresses his anguish (3)⁷

Job finally speaks. In vivid language, he says that he wishes that he had not been born (vv. 1–10). He goes on to question why God kept him alive at birth (vv. 11–19) and why he allows people to live when they want to die (vv. 20–23). He concludes:⁸

²³[Why is life given] to a man whose way is hidden,
whom God has hemmed in?

²⁴For my sighing comes before my food,
and my groanings are poured out like waters.

²⁵For the dreadful thing I dreaded has come upon me,
and what I feared has come to me.

²⁶I am not at ease, I am not quiet;
I am not at rest, yet turmoil comes.

⁷ Single figures refer to chapters.

⁸ Following on v. 20.

Job's friends argue with him (4–31)

Job's questioning prompts his friends to speak. They took the simple view that his suffering must be due to some sin he has committed, and that what he should do is repent.

Job, however, disagreed. He was not aware of any sin that would account for his suffering. He told his friends this, and that the line they were taking did not help him.

But his friends stuck to their view, and this led to a long argument between them. This argument forms a major part of the book, its length serving to heighten the drama.

The course of the argument is as follows.⁹

- **Eliphaz speaks.** He tells Job that it is the righteous who prosper and the wicked who do not (4) and counsels him to accept God's correction (5).
 - **Job replies.** He says that Eliphaz's words do not help him (6) and continues to express his anguish (7).
- **Bildad speaks.** He tells Job to plead to God for mercy (8).
 - **Job replies.** He says that, what he would like to do, argue with God, he cannot, God being who he is (9). He goes on to complain to God about his suffering (10).
- **Zophar speaks.** He tells Job that he should not speak like this. He should repent; God would then bless him (11).
 - **Job replies.** He says that God acts as he wills (12), and that his friends speak wrongly (13). He goes on to ask God to listen to him (14).
- **Eliphaz speaks again.** He accuses Job of speaking emptily: it is the wicked who suffer (15).
 - **Job replies.** He tells his friends that they do not help (16), and continues to complain about his situation (17). Frustrated that they do not accept what he says, he tells them that he feels sure that there is someone in heaven who will one day vindicate him (16:19–21).
- **Bildad speaks again.** He tells Job to be sensible: the people God punishes are the wicked (18).
 - **Job replies.** He says that his friends have let him down, and that everyone is against him (19). He is again sure, however, that someone will one day vindicate him (v. 25, 'I know that my protector¹⁰ lives').
- **Zophar speaks again.** He says that he must reply: God brings suffering on the wicked (20).
 - **Job replies.** He tells Zophar that he is speaking nonsense: wicked people do prosper (21).
- **Eliphaz speaks for a third time.** He tells Job explicitly that he is suffering because of his sins. He should repent; God would then bless him (22).
 - **Job replies.** He says that, if he could find God, he would plead his cause, but cannot find him (23). God will indeed deal with the wicked, but very much in his own time (24).

⁹ I go through this quickly, turning over the relevant pages of my Bible as I do. This gives hearers a feel for the intensity of the argument, and how long it goes on for.

¹⁰ Heb. *gō'ēl*, usually translated 'redeemer'. This has to be understood in its context, following 16:19–21, not in its NT sense. Driver and Gray render it 'vindicator', Clines 'champion'. Compare, e.g., Prov. 23:11. Job's belief in a *gō'ēl* does not stop him complaining.

- **Bildad speaks for a third time.** He says that, with God being all-powerful, humans cannot be righteous (25).

- **Job replies.** He says that what Bildad has said does not help him. He accepts that God is all-powerful (26). While insisting that his friends' judgment of him is wrong, he further accepts, as they have been saying, that God will deal with the wicked (27), and that wisdom is to be found only in God (28). He goes on to recall happier days, when people respected him and God blessed him (29), and laments that all this has changed: people are now against him and God does not answer (30). He concludes that, if he has broken any commandments, it would be right for God to judge him, but he has not (31).

An unexpected interjection (32–37)

At this point, the story of Job takes an unexpected turn. A younger man comes into it:

^{32:1}So these three men ceased from answering Job, because he was righteous in his own eyes. ²Then the anger of Elihu the son of Barachel the Buzite, of the family of Ram, burned. His anger burned against Job because he had justified himself rather than God. ³His anger also burned against his three friends because they had found no answer, yet had condemned Job. ⁴Elihu had waited to have words with Job because they were older in age than he. ⁵When Elihu saw that there was no answer in the mouths of the three men, his anger burned.

So he speaks. He says that he has not spoken up to this point out of deference to the older men (32:6–22). He proceeds to tell Job that he is wrong to complain to God about his suffering. He explains that God brings suffering on individuals, not merely to punish them as the older men had implied in much of what they said,¹¹ but to *correct* them (33). He describes how God may speak to a man 'in a dream, a vision of the night' (vv. 13–18) and chasten him 'with pain on his bed, and continual strife in his bones' (vv. 19–22), but accepts the man's penitence and 'restores his righteousness' (vv. 23–28).¹² He concludes:

²⁹Lo, God does all these things
two times or three with a man,
³⁰to bring back his soul from the pit,
[for him] to be lit with the light of the living.

Elihu goes on to emphasize that God is God. He is altogether above us. We human beings are not in a position to question him (34–35). His greatness is seen in the wonders of the created order (36–37). Elihu calls on Job to recognize this:

^{37:14}'Listen to this, O Job;
stand still and consider God's wonders.
¹⁵Do you know when God put them in place,
and makes the light[ening] of his clouds to shine?
¹⁶Do you know about the balancing of the clouds,
the wonderful works of the one perfect in knowledge,
¹⁷you whose garments are hot,
when the earth is still from the [gentle] south wind?
¹⁸Can you, with him, spread out the sky,
[pictured as] strong as a cast metal mirror?'

¹¹ Eliphaz briefly mentioned correction at the beginning (5:17), but as the argument proceeded, the line taken by the older men hardened [compare Eliphaz's final contribution (22)].

¹² In verses 23–25, Elihu refers to 'an intermediary' (Heb. *lûš*). In the setting of the OT, this is presumably a priest (cf. Heb. 5:1–3). The intermediary refers to 'a ransom' (Heb. *kōper*), presumably an animal for sacrifice (Lev. 4:1–6:7; cf. Job 42:8).

God speaks to Job (38–41)

At this point, God speaks. What he says follows on from what Elihu has said. Elihu said, ‘Look at the wonders of the created order’; God says, ‘Look at my handiwork’:

^{38:1}Then the LORD answered Job out of the tempest and said:
²‘Who is this that darkens counsel
 by words without knowledge?
³Gird up your loins now like a man,
 for I will question you, and you will enlighten me.
⁴Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundations?
 Declare if you know and understand.
⁵Who determined its measurements, for [surely] you know!
 Or who has stretched a line upon it?
⁶On what were its bases sunk,
 or who laid its cornerstone,
⁷when the morning stars sang together
 and all the sons of God shouted for joy?’

God continues to challenge Job in this way, first over the physical universe (38:8–38) and then all the animals (38:39–39:30). This has the effect of silencing Job (40:1–5). God goes on to ask him whether he has the ability to justify himself, seeing that he does not have the ability to capture a big beast¹³ (40:6–24), still less tame a big reptile¹⁴ (41).¹⁵

Job responds (42:1–6)

¹Then Job answered the LORD and said:
²‘I know that you can do all things,
 and no purpose is withheld from you.
³[You asked,] “Who is this hiding counsel without knowledge?” [38:2]
 Therefore [yes] I declared but did not understand
 things too wonderful for me, things I did not know.
⁴[You said,] “Listen, now, and I will speak;
 I will question you and you will enlighten me.” [38:3]
⁵I had heard of you [yes] by the hearing of the ear,
 but now my eye has seen you.
⁶Therefore I despise myself,
 and repent in dust and ashes.’

God speaks to Job’s friends (42:7–9)

God goes on to speak to Job’s friends:

⁷And it was that, after the LORD had spoken these words to Job, the LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite, ‘My anger burns against you and your two friends, for you have not spoken about me what is right, as my servant Job has. ⁸Now therefore take for yourselves seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job, and offer up a burnt offering for yourselves. And my servant Job will pray for you. I will surely accept [his presenting to me] his face so as not to deal with you according to your folly, for you have not spoken about me what is right, as my servant Job has.’

¹³ Heb. *b^ehēmōt* (behemoth), possibly the hippopotamus.

¹⁴ Heb. *liwyātān* (leviathan), possibly the crocodile.

¹⁵ Some scholars think that these animals have a mystical significance, but the descriptions are of the animals as animals.

⁹So Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite went and did as the LORD had spoken to them, and the LORD accepted Job's [presenting of his] face.

Here God compares favourably what Job had said with what his friends had said. This does not mean that everything Job had said was right, as he has just acknowledged (vv. 1–6). Notice that God does not condemn the younger man, Elihu.

God restores Job's prosperity (42:10–17)

God then makes Job prosperous again:

¹⁰The LORD turned the captivity of Job [released him from his suffering] when he prayed for his friends. The LORD added to Job double of all that had been his. ¹¹Then came to him all his brothers and all his sisters, and all who knew him before, and they ate bread with him in his house. And they sympathized with him and comforted him concerning all the evil that the LORD had brought upon him. Each of them gave to him a piece of money and a ring of gold.

¹²So the LORD blessed the latter days of Job more than the first. ...

This blessing is spelt out in the verses that follow.

Notice that the narrator here attributes Job's sufferings to God. It was Satan who had afflicted them, but it was God who had given him permission to do so.

Lessons

From the above exposition, we can draw the following lessons from the book of Job:¹⁶

- The main lesson is that a person's suffering is not necessarily due to his or her sins. Job's three friends were wrong to make this link. The key verse is 42:7: 'the LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite, "My anger burns against you and your two friends, *for you have not spoken about me what is right*"'.

So while a person's suffering can be due to his or her sins (1 Cor. 11:27–30), it may not be. God may allow Satan to inflict suffering to demonstrate a person's faith and obedience, and, in the process, refine them.¹⁷ In the NT, Jesus is said to have 'learned obedience from things which he suffered' (Heb. 5:7–10) and to be 'the founder and perfecter (*teleiōtēs*) of the faith' (Heb. 12:2). Peter wrote of trials 'testing' faith (1 Pet. 1:3–9), and James of this testing 'producing steadfastness (*hupomonē*)', citing Job's as an example (Jas. 1:2–4, 5:10–11). Paul wrote in a similar vein: 'tribulation produces steadfastness, and steadfastness proof [of character] (*dokimē*), and proof [of character] hope' (Rom. 5:3–4).

Suffering of this kind is therefore part of God's programme to discipline his people (Prov. 3:11–12, Rev. 3:19–20). Discipline is broader than refinement because it includes correction, but the objective is the same: to develop faith and obedience. Elihu spoke about correction at length (33:14–30). He thus went some way towards explaining Job's suffering, but not all the way. Job's suffering was for refinement, not correction.

¹⁶ Compare Eric Ortlund, 'Five Truths for Sufferers from the Book of Job,' *Themelios* 40 (2015), 253–62.

¹⁷ Ortlund discounts refinement, but the NT references support this.

- A second lesson of the book of Job is that Job-like suffering does not last for ever. There is an end to it (Jas. 5:11b). This may come in this world, as it did for Job, or in the world to come, as it did for Jesus (Heb. 12:2).
- A third lesson is that those who are reckoned to be wise are not necessarily so. At the time of Job, the elderly were reckoned to be wise (15:10), but in the narrative they are shown up by the younger man. Today, young people tend to think they are wise. All need to remember, as Job himself did (28:28): ‘The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom’ (Prov. 9:10).