

Job

LIFE ON THE ASH HEAP



Jim McGuiggan

Job's

Life on the Ash Heap

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Job Fights God's Battle for Him

By Jim McGuigan



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Life on the Ash Heap

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*Dedicated
to*

ANNE AND BOBBY



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FOREWORD

This is no commentary but it makes use of and stays in touch with the text of the book of Job. For those who are looking for more I've mentioned a few books in the bibliography that would more than make up for what's lacking in this little volume.

What you'll get here stays in touch with the texts used while I try, as they say, to allow the text to speak to the life situation of various readers. Some of us need consoled, some need comforted, some need called to be brave and to endure in the circumstances and hurt they can't change. Some of us need to be reminded that we're more blessed than we think and that we've got no good reason to complain. Some among us need to be commended and praised for the splendid lives they live whether those lives are joy-filled or pain-filled or a nice balance of both.

That's the sort of thing you'll find here. It's about a man in ancient times and men and women in these days who fight God's battle for him against all the powers of cynicism and despair and who help us to believe that gallantry is alive and well in the world and that by God's grace it's not beyond us to so live that we can be counted by others in the list of the noble ones.

The book falls into three sections:

Life in the Sunshine - which listens to Job's description of his life when God and he were friends—in the days before God sent calamities that dismantled his world;

Life in the Shadow - which listens to Job's response to anguish and mystery that came close to unhinging his mind;

Life after the Storm - which looks at Job's ending his one-man protest against divine and callous mismanagement of the human work force—the time when he decided to “show up for work again”.

Scholars won't read this book (of course!) but I think there's something here for the rank and file of us who aren't very skilled on how to exegete or exposit or figure out just how the book of Job hangs together but know both how to suffer and how to rejoice.

I think the introductory material is useful but if you're really hurting I can see that you might want to skip it and search for something more immediately relevant to your pain. That would probably be a mistake but on the other hand, you know your own place in life and maybe you can read the introductory material later.

My Ethel died on Easter Sunday, 2009 and I'm still very lonely without her (now and then I feel completely emotionally unzipped). But I'm fully persuaded that in and through the Lord Jesus that we'll meet again in a post-resurrection joy—friends forever. In the meantime the things I've learned and am learning from scripture and life, from the ancient Job and his modern equals are doing more than keeping me on my feet—they're assuring me that all's well that ends well and that the proper response from people like you and me is to "show up for work".

Genuinely, and in the Lord Jesus,
jim mcguiggan

Something of an Introduction



Apart from Esther, if there's a book in the Bible where God is not the immediate central character, the book of Job is one. It reads as if God consciously chooses to sit back and watch the man he risks his reputation on. The central character is Job and the pivotal elements are these: Satan slanders a remarkably righteous and wealthy man and God goes to his defense in an even more remarkable way. The rest of the book takes its departure and direction from what the first two chapters tell us.



Introduction

The author and nature of the book

The storyline

A very basic outline

Why the book was written

Major messages of the book

Some perhaps helpful suggestions

The Author and Nature of the Book

God knows who wrote the book of Job and when it was written but nobody else does. It's probably true that most scholars think the book of Job is a great work of fiction that wrestles with the problems of human existence, including "innocent" suffering in a world governed by a God who is said to be both all-powerful and all-caring. These scholars remind us of numerous ancient writings that deal with similar issues and think that Job is a Jewish contribution to that kind of literature. Most evangelical types take it that Job was an actual person who actually endured what the book of Job says he endured.

I don't say these questions are unimportant—they certainly have their place. But at this point I have no interest in them and if the Holy Spirit supervised the writing of an "extended parable" or "novel" and gave it to

his People as a part of canonical scripture that would suit me just fine. I simply take it that Job was an actual and historical person and that the prose prologue and epilogue give us interpreted events and that the poetry offers us the substance of the speeches of the men concerned.

Here's the Storyline

Apart from Esther, if there's a book in the Bible where God is not the immediate central character the book of Job is one. It reads as if God consciously chooses to sit back and watch the man he risks his reputation on. The central character is Job and the pivotal elements are these: Satan slanders a remarkably righteous and wealthy man and God goes to his defense in an even more remarkable way. The rest of the book takes its departure and direction from what the first two chapters tell us.

Job, a man of unequaled piety and righteousness is also the wealthiest man in the entire East. In Chapter 1 God praises him in the presence of Satan, who insists that Job has no integrity or genuine love for God and in fact he sees God as a divine meal-ticket. Satan implies that anyone would serve and profess to love God under Job's plush circumstances but if God took from him his blessings the man would have nothing more to do with him. God commissions Satan to take the material blessings from him, along with his children, but despite the tragedy Job sticks to God like glue. Satan tightens the screws in Chapter 2 and claims that if God put his hand on Job's body, to bring disease and threaten death, that Job would desert him. God commissions Satan to do that for him but even illness and disfigurement fail to make Job turn away from God.

In Chapters 3—31 Job's friends arrive to commiserate with and strengthen him. They share the same basic message and approach to Job's situation and assure him that if he will only repent of his sin against God that God would receive him back into favor and restore the blessings

he has lost. Job explodes at Eliphaz's remarks, scalds his friends and refuses to admit that he has done anything that warrants this punishment from God. The tension between them increases as the exchanges progress. Frustrated with his friends Job speaks directly to God in chapters 29—31 (formally, in an "oath of innocence") and demands a meeting with him.

Then in Chapters 32—37 a young observer, Elihu, speaks up. He offers himself as a sort of referee between Job and his friends, not only because he's dissatisfied with the speeches of both Job and his friends, but because Job has been begging for someone to act as a referee between God and himself. Elihu thinks he's the right man for the job.

It's at this point in Chapters 37—42 that God answers Job's persistent call for a face to face meeting. Out of a storm he speaks and convicts Job of his ignorance and of Job's willingness to sacrifice God on the altar of his own need for vindication. Job confesses his ignorance and repents of his pride-filled words of self-righteousness.

At the conclusion of it all God favorably compares what Job said with what his friends had said and makes Job the mediator and priest for them. He then restores Job to an even greater state of blessedness than he had before (42:7-17).

A Very Basic Outline

The usual very basic outline, while it hides numerous structural difficulties, gives us a summary of how the book is put together.

- I. The Opening Scenes: 1:1-2:13
- II. Exchanges between Job and his Friends: 3-28
- III. Job's formal defense and "oath of innocence":
29-31
- IV. Elihu speaks: 32-37
- V. God's response to Job's formal defense: 38-41

VI. Job's Brief Response to God: 42:1-6

VII. The Conclusion of the Drama: Job 42:7-17

Why Was The Book Written?

Though the content is easy enough to describe, leading OT Wisdom Literature scholar, James Crenshaw, thinks it's difficult if not impossible to know for sure why the book was written. Matatiahu Tsevat felt sure it was written to set the rest of the OT on its ear. It was written, he thinks, to show that no moral government operates in this life or in this world. William P. Brown is sure it was written to give a new answer to a question like, "What is a good person?" or "How should we define good character?" Georg Fohrer followed by Philip Yancey thinks it was written to challenge people to live in faith under suffering so that the real question is not, "Where is God when suffering comes?" but "Where is the man of faith when suffering comes?" Gregory Parsons who follows Samuel Terrien thinks it was written to show that humanity is utterly dependent on God's sovereign grace and is called to respond in faith. Sylvia Huberman Scholnick thinks the book was written to stress the truth that God is King as well as Judge so that the notion of "justice" should be expanded. Numerous authors think it was written to explain the existence of suffering in the world and in particular, why bad things happen to good people. The views mentioned above overlap with each other and also include major truths stressed in the book of Job.

Major Messages of the Book

Despite the difficulties ranged against finding one central purpose for the book many see what they believe to be major lessons and messages in it. The authors mentioned above show us that it isn't hard to find many obvious truths in the book though each would suggest his/her stress is the central thrust. Anyone reading the

book could make her/his own list of “points” but here, I think, are some of the points the author intended to make.

1. *The limits of human wisdom.*

The reader is given the full explanation about what has triggered Job’s terrible ordeal and then is made to watch and listen while five (including Elihu and Job) wise, experienced and God-fearing men run around in circles, repeating themselves, in the vain attempt to proclaim or uncover the truth about this particular situation.

Whatever else the book of Job parades before us it is a piece of wisdom that teaches us that the wise should recognize the limits of human wisdom even when that wisdom comes from God. The book is a good illustration of a “limiting” proverb, the kind we find in Proverbs 20:24. “A man’s steps are directed by the Lord. How then can anyone understand his own way?” Or Proverbs 16:9: “In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps.”

Wisdom literature doesn’t regard all men as fools and incapable of making wise choices and living uprightly—far from it. Just the same, Job and other Wisdom material tells us to be modest and do our level best to stay off God’s throne because only he is big and wise enough to fill it.

2. *Humans are to embrace the mysteries of life in a spirit of trust.*

Incredible as it may seem to us at times, God put a bewildered Job to grief and still expected him to maintain his trust in the God who had been his lifelong friend. Job’s initial trust and his later confession and repentance are the right responses to mystery in a world governed by a faithful and righteous God. Job isn’t told what happened “over his head” but then the book wasn’t written for Job—it was written for us.

Job isn’t supposed to be our example in *everything* but he certainly was intended to be an inspiration and challenge

to us as one who in protesting trust struggles his way through the darkness toward the as yet unseen light.

3. The loving devotion of humans to God has cosmic consequences.

We must allow the exchanges between God and the Satan to affect our understanding of the point of the book. *Although Job didn't know it, he was fighting God's battle for him against the evil forces of cynicism and gloom in the universe.* Job's quarrel with God is a lover's quarrel and we're to remember that God is counting on Job to live gallantly as well as passionately.

4. The blessings of life are always the gracious provision of God.

In his pain and rage and understandable self-centeredness Job has said scandalous things about God so we know he hadn't *earned* his return to prosperity. Numerous texts in the book tell us that even the wicked receive their blessings from God and in his speech God tells us that he provides for the beasts though they are oblivious to God's hand in it. NT texts touch on this truth (see Acts 14:15-17; 17:24-28; Matthew 5:43-48; 6:25-30).

5. God is sovereign and will go his own way to accomplish his holy and loving purposes without asking man's permission.

When God finally spoke to Job it was out of a storm and he didn't offer him an "explanation". The storm, at this point, doesn't suggest threat but it does suggest power and transcendence. Job isn't dealing with one of his peers when he is dealing with God and God isn't his "pal" in that too cozy sense.

While God came in the whirlwind to do Job good he apologized for nothing! The book isn't telling us that God has the right to pervert justice but that he does have the right as sovereign to make radical demands of us if it serves his holy and overarching purpose for humanity. The book

of Job first assumes and then positively claims that God not only cares for his creation but that he is proud of it.

And the book isn't written to *urge* us to rage against God as Job at times does. I hear some say that if you don't rage against God when you're in pain that your faith isn't "authentic". I think that's rubbish! We aren't to grovel—that's clear from Job; but to sacrifice God on the altar of our own self-righteousness or our pain is the other extreme. He is the Sovereign Lord and the book of Job makes that clear.

Not everyone feels the need to rage against God under extreme conditions; they grieve deeply but they trust implicitly and to suggest their faith isn't "authentic" because they don't rage is outrageous. When in the Covenanter days the jeering prison guards opened the bag and dropped Cameron's son's head at his feet the shaken old man picked it up and looked long at it before saying, "It is the Lord, let him do as he sees fit." I'm *not* saying that this is the only way authentic faith will respond but I am saying that to claim Cameron *groveled* because he didn't throw a fit and scream at God as heartless is an insult to the man. Faith that leads to screaming at God can be true faith—that's for sure—but faith need not express itself that way and the book of Job wasn't written to say it must.

I've been told it's always better to "keep a civil tongue in your head" when you're speaking to God but why would that be true if authentic faith is characterized by a non-civil tongue? Why would it be *better* to keep a civil tongue in our heads if the book of Job was written to show us that "true" faith may well slander God during tough times? What if faith didn't scream accusations but said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit"?

6. Trust and loyalty exist even in those "trusters" who are far from calm and far from being quietly submissive.

The book presents God's hero as just that, *God's man*, whose integrity is real in weeping or anger, in earnest

pleading or hot protest, in submissive prayers or scathing denunciations. This trusting hero was a civil war, a mob. He wasn't what thoughtless people often insist is the picture of a model servant. He wasn't the neat, controlled, even-tempered, calmly-assured and smiling-through-it-all figure who knows God is in charge. In the case of Job, it's precisely *because* he believes that God is in charge that he is as mad as a hatter. Because he believes God *is* in charge Job thinks the world ought to be governed and organized better.

In Hebrew the book of Psalms is called (the book of) "Praises" and its last word (Psalm 150) is: "Let everything that breathes praise the Lord." The entire collection of psalms is called "tehillim"—praises—and that includes the psalms of protest and lament and sorrow. The protests of the psalms, the weeping and complaining were all brought to God *as part of their trust in God*. They didn't go down the road to some Ba'al shrine or over to Molech's place and complain about Yahweh. No, they came to God.

They didn't get off with a group of complaining Jews and whisper treason and unease, spreading the stories of their disappointments and periods of bewilderment in unlit streets or gloomy cellars. No! They sang them—in church! *In church*, for pity's sake! This was no arrogant spirit that looked around to see if others were impressed by their boldness. It wasn't an ugly attempt to prove that they had "authentic faith" that would even put God in the dock. Together they sang their broken hearts to the one that had earned the right to hear their complaints first hand.

And when the happy psalms were sung the poor and downtrodden sang them along with their richly-blessed brothers and sisters. They didn't begrudge the blessings to those that had them. And when the sad and groaning psalms were sung, the happy people sang them along with their hurting brothers and sisters. The lonely people and those under pressure in one way or another were not left to sing alone for their brothers and sisters added their

voices to the voices of the anguished and carried the sad sounds higher into the air—just so God could hear them. They didn't simply "put up with" the sufferers while they sang their hurt to God—they fully identified with them.

They all sang out of the same hymnbook. The people of Israel by the Spirit of God and in light of their history with God put all their songs together, lament and protest as well as praise and thanksgiving and commitment; put them in a single hymnbook and stamped PRAISES on the cover *and God wanted it so!*

7. We're to note the ugly picture of self-righteousness in full pursuit of the lame and ragged as they try to shake us off.

I don't know that that is a point the author wished us to get but it certainly is one we can legitimately draw because it's shown to us in stark and vivid clarity. Once the debate got going it's clear that the friends were happy to sit on God's throne for him and pursue the poor near-lunatic sufferer right to the edge of doom.

Some Suggestions for Reading the Book with Profit

1. The repetition is deliberate.

One thing that strikes you about the book of Job is that the speakers repeat themselves a lot. The words aren't always the same of course but the central thrust of each speech remains pretty much the same. For many of us the book of Job is like a train ride that begins well with interesting things to see but before long the interesting stuff is left behind and for most of the trip it's essentially "more of the same" and then it picks up again just before we arrive at the station.

As Josipovichi has taught us a similar thing happens at the beginning of the Bible. A blaze of creative activity is followed by drama well told which takes us through, say, Exodus 18, the rhythm falters a bit until the drama resumes in chapters 32—34 but brooding dullness sets in again and

becomes almost unbearable when we arrive at Leviticus and large sections of Numbers.

Let's face it, a lot of the rules and regulations, lists, genealogies and descriptions in the nineteen chapters in Exodus, the twenty-seven in Leviticus and a large number in Numbers were redundant before many years passed. How could they be of interest? And if we're sure they aren't of real value to us we feel no desire to plow through them—so we skip them!

But they're of vital importance and abiding interest for many reasons. Let me mention these two since they make contact with the structure of the book of Job: *The OT combines repetition and a slowing of the narrative as a method of teaching.*

The countless details about the Tabernacle are given not only for information purposes; they're given to stress the importance and centrality of worship! Gabriel Josipovichi points out the difference between the making of the Tabernacle and the Golden Calf.

In Exodus the actual making of the Gold Calf is told in *three verses* (32:2-4) while the making of the Tabernacle is described in *thirteen chapters*. In the record of making the Calf you have the impression of impulsiveness, speed and passion that tell us of a people who want what they want then and there. It's all done in the twinkling of an eye; the materials are hastily gathered, thrown into the fire and out jumps this calf-god—in *three verses* (32:2-4).

In the case of the Tabernacle there is a "loving lingering" over the details by people whose hearts were moved by the Spirit of God. You need to imagine the joyful groups of men and women working together day after day on tiny details, carefully fitting things together, producing harmony and rich texture as the Tent rose out of the dust in the desert, a place for God to live in at the heart of the nation.

The speed of the preceding drama is in contrast to the slow, painstaking and patient work to produce the

Tabernacle. Worship is not to be rushed; unbridled impulse and reckless speed dominated by a restless and fevered people (see Exodus 32:22-23) ejects or makes God sit in an aisle seat at the back whereas worship in *his* house makes him center. The reader of these sections in Exodus and elsewhere is *supposed* to sense that the pace has slowed.

The repetition in Job has a different agenda but delivers its message to us in a similar way. We're *supposed* to note the sameness of the speeches; we're *supposed* to sense that they have nothing much more to say so they simply say the same things over and over and are no nearer the truth at the end than at the beginning. Allow yourself to feel the slight touch of frustration that must have galled the disputants and in that way to sense that human wisdom has its limits.

The reader is supposed to agree with Job who quickly recognizes that only God can deal with this situation (13:2-3 illustrates this). He knows he hasn't the answer and he's dead certain his wise friends don't! (Isn't that your own experience—today?)

2. Keep in mind that no one in the book believed in a rigid theory of retribution.

Numerous scholars insist that Job and his friends believed in rigid retribution. That is, they say their moral world view was like a Coke machine, so much righteousness in and so much blessing out; so much evil in and so much measured punishment out; a pound of blessing or a pound of cursing for a pound of goodness or evil. These scholars use phrases like *quid pro quo* retribution or *a mechanically exact* arrangement or they speak of it being "rigidly exact." This is manifestly incorrect. Not a single character in the book believes that!

It's true that they all believed in divine retribution (as do the rest of the Bible characters including Jesus and Paul). But they did not believe it was all mechanical and precisely worked out. We know this because they *everywhere* speak

of innocent people suffering and wicked people prospering. They accuse Job of being a wicked hypocrite all of his life and yet he was fabulously rich and Job himself accuses God of misgoverning the world by allowing the righteous to be oppressed. It's true he has God's treatment of him in mind but he doesn't restrict the accusation of mismanagement to his own case. As his final speech (29—31) will show, at no point in the book does he change his mind about retribution but he doesn't ever believe in a mechanical or quid pro quo form of retribution. *That's not where Job's problem lay and to place it there distorts the entire message of the book.*

3. Don't expect calm reasoning in the book.

Once the troubles come Job is in awful pain so we shouldn't expect him to speak like a logic-machine and we're not to treat his speech as if it were calmly delivered theology. His agonized cries aren't statements of doctrinal positions or attempts at systematic theology; they're cries of hurt astonishment, as if he was going around telling everyone who would listen, "Can you believe God would do such a thing? Isn't that disgraceful?" He admits his pain has made his speech reckless (6:3) and he does what we all do when we're in agony and angry—he contradicts himself.

On the one hand he wishes he was dead and on the other he laments the fact that life is passing too quickly. One moment he's saying God doesn't bother to punish the wicked and the next he says God will punish his friends if they continue to tell lies in His defense. At one point he hates God and wishes he could die so he wouldn't have to deal with him ever again and later he confesses (so I think) that he misses God terribly and wishes things were as they once had been.

4. There were always other options the wise men never took.

The friends didn't *have* to believe that Job was very wicked. They could have believed him when he said he was

completely innocent of any outrageous wrong. They had known his life's history, had heard no breath of scandal or had any reason to accuse him of wickedness other than that he was now suffering under God's governance. It's true they believed in retribution but they had seen the innocent suffer (orphans and widows, for example) so they didn't need to take the cynical view of Job that they finally took.

Job didn't have to take the view of God that his friends dished out. He had the same traditions and experiences his friends had. He himself had eased the suffering of the innocent and vulnerable (29, 31) so he knew that calamity could come on the guiltless. He didn't have to think that what happened to him proved God to be treacherous or callous or a bungling governor of the world or even that he was holding Job to be guilty of some crime!

Tsevat tells us that the book of Job is saturated in traditional Jewish theology. That makes sense to me. This can only underscore the truth that all the figures in the book would have been well acquainted with "innocent suffering". Why do we have to read it as though they had never heard of such a thing? Since they were well acquainted with it (and said so!) they could have taken that approach with Job and Job could have taken that approach with God.

5. Being an experienced sufferer doesn't make us infallible.

This is a hard saying but it's demonstrated throughout the book of Job not only by the wise and wild guesses of Job's wise friends but also by the fact that Job didn't know what was going on. When we're the ones enduring or have endured terrible loss we're tempted to think that we're now in the position to know the mind and purpose of God. We "know" why this or that has happened. Then because we "know" why it has happened to us we "know" why it happens to everyone we meet and some of us begin to speak like oracles on the suffering issue.

I'm not suggesting that sufferers can't or don't gain insights that can be valuable to others—many among us do, of course. There are assurances that those experienced in suffering can give, truths they can tell and should tell to those wrestling with the pain of pain. But we need to be very careful when we pronounce on God's "purpose" in specific cases of loss.

"Now, let me tell you why God has done this to *you*..." As soon as we descend to applying God's overarching purpose for the human family to how it works out in individual cases we need to be sure we've been given a hotline from the Throne Room and that the one we're speaking to believes that that's the case. There are truths of Scripture that we can and *must* tell without giving them a pleasing "spin" to make them palatable but to sit as "a guru of individual suffering questions" is a position we should decisively reject no matter how often it's offered to us.

I've more than once seen sufferers who, after they came through their own sore trials, were less than compassionate and less than understanding with other sufferers. They made it through with not too much effort, don't you see, so others who are having a hard time simply surviving are sometimes branded as wimps. How do we explain that? How do we explain the fact that some make it through in to the light and others go down? Stephen Broyles in his fine book simply acknowledges that he doesn't know how people make it through. Some of the greatest sufferers, other than stating the general truth that God sustained them, will tell you that they really don't know how *they* made it through.

I know a lot of great sufferers and it isn't their wise insights into God's way of governing the world that is profoundly profitable to us—it's their unwavering and gallant trust!

6. Even truth must be handled truthfully.

To judge the character and truth of what Job's friends said we have to note not only *what* they said, but what they meant to do with what they said. For example, Elihu insists that God is infinitely greater than humans—that is true. But he used that truth against Job to show that God didn't care whether humans were good or bad—that's a lie (see 35:5-7 and 22:2-3). Sometimes we can speak the truth in support of a lie and that makes the entire presentation a lie even if you mean to do God a favor. At one point Job called his friends *false witnesses on God's behalf!*

The friends finally came to believe that Job was a *hypocritical and secret* sinner and that God was punishing him for it—that was untrue. But they spoke truths about God's wisdom, power and justice in support of that untruth. In judging what they said we're to judge where they were going with those truths and this makes sense of 42:7 where God rebukes them for not speaking the truth about him "as my servant Job has." God was not denying that the friends spoke many truths; it's what they were doing with those truths that made them false witnesses. What is true of the friends is true of Job. Job's bottom line was true though he often blundered on his way there. The bottom line for the friends was incorrect even though they were correct at many points on the way to it.

7. The God Job was mad at didn't exist.

The god Job attacked was a fiction, a distorted image, someone that didn't exist. It was the kind of god the true God would (and often did) attack. No one hated the perverse religion of the worst of the Pharisees more than Jesus and no one hates a treacherous or capricious or callous or useless god more than God. The god Job was attacking was heartless and a betrayer of friendship but it was a god he imagined, a god his friends unknowingly were feeding him while he was vulnerable. That god was the creation of his agony, the goading of his friends and a misinterpretation of the facts.

In raging against a god like that, Job was actually calling for a God with integrity. Without knowing he was doing it, he was proving he wasn't the "yes" man that Satan said he was. Again, this helps us to understand 42:7 where God said that Job (who had done all that screaming at and about "God") had spoken right things about him. His accusations were against the god Job thought God had become. He was calling God back to his "old self," which was a God of righteousness and faithfulness.

Now it isn't all good news because the God who put Job to grief was the true God and Job was attacking the one that hurt him. As the text gives it, when Job blames God for his trouble, he's laying the blame at the right doorstep (1:16; 42:11) but he had the wrong explanation. The God who worked in and through Job wouldn't be domesticated nor would he be imprisoned by general truths of wisdom. If Job's *interpretation* of the situation has been correct then God would have been treacherous and heartless. *That* God would not have been fit to be worshiped. *That* God would need to be convicted, would need to be held to account (by the standard of the true God) and would need to be denounced. That's precisely what Job engaged in.

But even while he raged some of what Job says shows he isn't completely satisfied with his own interpretation of things. He appeals to God for mercy, which says he isn't convinced that God is really heartless. He wonders if God won't maybe hide him in Sheol for a while and then bring him out and vindicate him, which says he isn't convinced that God is truly unjust. At one point he warns his friends against defending God with lies because God doesn't approve of lies and will punish them for it. In the book of Job there's more than one Job and more than one "God".

8. Remember the framework within which the book works.

The Satan/God exchanges in 1:6-12 and 2:1-6 are the pivot points for the rest of the book. So wherever we wander, however many "good lessons" we draw from this

exciting book of Job we must take those exchanges seriously as we let the book speak its message in its own way. When people say God was “testing” Job, there’s some truth in it because the experience did test him and it showed his faithful heart in an entirely new light. Still, putting it that way tends to obscure the fact that God wasn’t “testing” Job so much as “exhibiting” him. God had made up his mind about Job and saw him as someone he was proud of and it was to show that his faith in Job was perfectly well grounded that he put Job to grief. He didn’t put the man to grief to find out if Job was a glorious person; he put him to grief to *demonstrate* it; he “gambled” on Job, he risked his reputation on Job. The trial was not to discover if righteousness existed but to uncover an even deeper level of righteousness that God already knew was there. God knew Job loved him in the sunshine but he also knew Job would love him in the shadow.

While there may be truth in saying that Satan was slyly impugning God’s character, it’s a mistake to make too much of it since it isn’t clearly in the text. It’s *Job’s* character that is under attack by Satan. It is Job and not Satan who attacks God’s integrity and he does it in the dialogues. But even there, Job’s attack on God’s integrity is an extended demonstration of what Satan said didn’t exist—*Job’s* integrity and that’s what the Satan/God exchanges are all about.

It’s true, just the same, that the Accuser might have been implying that God was *bribing* people to serve him. Taking that to be the case Job was not only showing his own integrity he was (unknowingly) defending the character of God. God didn’t defeat the Accuser by obliterating him but by silencing through a little man on an ash heap.

9. It was God and not Satan who took Job’s blessings away.

It’s clear just from the reading that Satan is given power to afflict Job. It’s equally clear from the text that Satan thinks he is only doing God’s bidding. Satan twice says to

God, “Stretch out your hand and strike” (1:11 and 2:5) and God chooses to do it. In the narrative Satan is simply God’s agent or instrument—God does it through Satan. (See this also in 2 Corinthians 12 where a “messenger of Satan” is used for a holy purpose—that is, to keep Paul from self-aggrandizement.)

It’s important for the reading of the entire book and its message that we accept the truth that it is *God* who withdraws the blessings. Without exception every character in the book lays the calamity at God’s feet. Job does it repeatedly, the friends argue it all the way through their speeches, Elihu insists on it, Satan challenges God to do it and the narrator expressly says God did it (42:11). Does it make a difference if we drive a nail into a wall using a hammer or a stone? Either way we’re the one who’s driving the nail and God’s chosen instrument in the Job experience is the Satan; but it is God’s doing.

To say it was Satan’s doing and not God’s empties the entire book of coherence and power. Though it’s true, it isn’t enough to say God “allowed” Satan to remove the blessings—God *commissioned* him to do it in order to further his divine purpose (do see 2 Corinthians 12:1-10).

10. Job’s central problem was not simply that he was hurting—it was what he thought the hurting meant.

Job had seen God as his lordly Friend and sovereign of all that is; a Friend to whom Job had been faithful (29:1-5). Under the devastating calamities and with a bit of help from his earthly friends Job drew the conclusion that God had proved faithless and had turned against one of his faithful servants.

It’s true that 29—31 is a formal “oath of innocence” but not to see some nostalgia in 29:1-5 is, I think, to under-read it. There’s no suggestion that Job felt he had a cozy relationship with God as many of us evangelicals feel we have—God wasn’t his “chum” or his “pal” but God could be a friend to more than Abraham (Isaiah 41:8; 2 Chronicles

20:7; James 2:23). This feeling of lost friendship and peace is bad enough but what really guts Job is the claim that he is being *punished* for his crimes. It would be different if he hadn't come to believe this claim but he believes it and the injustice of it all drives him to the brink of spiritual madness.

If he had been the man Satan said he was he would simply have walked away from God and looked for another meal ticket. It was precisely because he *wasn't* such a man, that he had such a developed sense of integrity that he had a passion that wouldn't let even God off the hook if he thought him to be faithless—that's part of what led God to brag on him in the first place.

It misses the point of the book entirely to begin with questions about competing systems of retribution—the book wasn't written with such questions in mind. Job who knows he's innocent (not sinless!) is asking, "Has God been righteous (faithful) to his commitment to humanity and to me in particular?" We who have been expressly told what the situation is are asked to watch how the drama develops. The book isn't written to *argue* Job's innocence—it depends on it! It isn't written to show God is punishing an innocent man—God doesn't *punish* innocent people and he certainly wasn't *punishing* Job—he was defending him.

11. The Job we hear in the dialogues is fierce and willing to sacrifice God and his friends on the altar of his assurance that he has "kept the faith" (so to speak) but chapters 29—31 give us an in-depth look at the man's entire life.

Some people have suggested that Job was a hard sort of man who was more concerned about external religious observances than the real issues of life. That's an astonishing view. If we want to know what he's really like, we need to read his defense in chapters 29—31. In that section, the scholars tell us, he challenges God to meet him in court and disprove his innocence. There's no reason to believe that what he says about himself is untrue because whatever else

he believes he believes God hears him and if he's lying God will point it out. A reading of those chapters shows what a warm, generous-hearted and righteous man he is.

PART I

Life in the Sunshine



One woman who stands and defies an evil society is a redeemer. One boy or girl who will not bow to the shabby standards that a host of kids give obedience to is a savior. Just by living they makes us believe: "If there's one there can be a million and if there's a million there can be a world full." But equally inspiring there's this word that goes forth in the lives of people you know personally: "However many there'll be, by God's grace there'll be one!"



Life in the Sunshine

This section concerns itself with the life of Job in pre-calamity days. It stays in touch with chapters 29 – 31 where Job describes his life when he was wealthy and admired and God was obviously with him. People who are richly blessed can live lives of loveliness and strength as surely as the gallant sufferers can – this section makes that point and it looks at some of the things that generate and sustain that loveliness.

Of Sunshine and Shadow

I don't wish to give the impression that life "in the sunshine" can mean no more than life "when things are going well". Life in the "sunshine" can be life lived in vibrant trust in God even under severe trials – that's a sunny life. But I want to say a little about a righteous life that enjoys rich material and social blessings so for a while I'd like to look at how faithful Job describes himself when the money was rolling in, when his flocks and herds and fields were flourishing and everyone thought well of him.

Soon enough, in the story, we see him sitting on a rubbish dump scraping maggots from open wounds while his bones stare at him and his teeth are falling out. I'll characterize that as "life in the shadows" even though Job

was never more faithful to God than when he was the song of drunkards and the joke of heartless kids.

In short, though I recognize that this remark could easily infuriate some poor souls who are plagued with troubles: life can be “sunny” in the worst conditions. In this section I wish to say that life can be glorious even if you’re a rich and successful person and that as sure as there is a gospel for the sad people there is a gospel for the happy people; as sure as there is glory in the lives of brave sufferers there is glory in the lives of those who don’t know what calamity is.

Job’s “Oath of Innocence”

Those who know about these things have taught us that chapters 29 – 31 have a formal structure used by ancient societies when a dispute raged. In such a structure the accused makes a formal declaration of innocence and calls on his accuser to respond to him publicly. He “wants his day in court”; he insists on “due process” and demands that his self-defense be given a hearing.

This means that, as the book structures it, Job is demanding that God (not Satan!) come into court and convict him of wrong. In presenting his case Job knows that the sovereign God is well aware of what he is saying and *that* means we have to take his self-description as true. If it were not true Job knows God could expose it because “surely he sees how I behave, does he not count all my steps?” (31:4).

What we have, then, in 29 – 31 is a grand human who is a grand benefactor of his fellow-humans. He knows he’s a sinner like every other human but he cannot admit to being other than he is: someone who has loved God in righteousness and compassion and generosity and has acted in that spirit throughout his life with fellow-humans.

If there’s a section in scripture that shows us what an ideal leader would look like we have it here in 29 – 31! This isn’t arrogance or self-righteousness speaking; it’s a

bewildered, pained and an even desperate man looking for a handhold so he can maintain his grip on life or, to change the metaphor, he wants to clear a space around his feet so he can stand upright in the presence of the God he has trusted all his life.

What follows is a glimpse into the life of Job before the great darkness fell. As we read the various facets of his self-description I've no doubt that our minds go to people we know personally who make it clear that Job is still very much alive in the world today.

Making Hearts Sing

"...remembering the words of the Lord Jesus: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'." Acts 20:35

"Whoever heard me spoke well of me, and those who saw me commended me, because I rescued the poor who cried for help, and the fatherless who had none to assist him. The man who was dying blessed me; I made the widow's heart sing" (29:11-13). That's what Job said about himself but he wasn't bragging. He may well have been a bit red-faced as Paul was in 2 Corinthians 11:17, 21 when he was forced to brag to defend his gospel by defending himself though he said he felt like a bit of a fool in doing it. No, Job isn't boasting; he's desperate. In his desperation he tells of his generous heart and liberal way and what's more, he claims it was all public knowledge. He wiped away the tears of the vulnerable and left them singing.

Elsewhere I've rehearsed the experience of novelist and social critic George Gissing who went to the aid of a little boy he found crying and worked "sixpenny worth of miracle." Gissing died in 1903 but not before writing in that year a novel (of sorts) based on his own experiences. He called it *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*. Here's how the great man tells of the incident in his own words.

Near a hamlet, in a lonely spot by a woodside, I came upon a little lad of perhaps ten years old, who, his head hidden in his arms against a tree trunk, was crying bitterly. I asked him what was the matter, and after a little trouble – he was better than a mere bumpkin – I learned that, having been sent with sixpence to pay a debt, he had lost the money. The poor little fellow was in a state of mind which in a grave man would be called the anguish of despair; he must have been crying for a long time; every muscle in his face quivered as if under torture, his limbs shook; his eyes, his voice, uttered such misery as only the vilest criminal should be made to suffer. And it was because he had lost sixpence!

I could have shed tears with him – tears of pity and of rage at all this spectacle implied. On a day of indescribable glory, when earth and heaven shed benedictions upon the soul of man, a child, whose nature would have bidden him to rejoice as only childhood may, wept his heart out because his hand had dropped a sixpenny piece! The loss was a very serious one, and he knew it; he was less afraid to face his parents, than overcome by misery at the thought of the harm he had done them. Sixpence dropped by the wayside, and a whole family made wretched! What are the due descriptive terms for a state of ‘civilization’ in which such a thing as this is possible? I put my hand into my pocket and wrought sixpenny-worth of miracle!”

If we’ve never done something like that we’ve always wanted to, haven’t we? The delicious thrill of transforming a scene of anguish into one of disbelieving joy by writing a check is hard to equal. It makes your heart sing! There’s too much needless sorrow in the world and a lot of it could be removed by a generous and wise sharing of wealth. I know

there are many problems that are only made worse by “throwing money at them” but in my own tiny little life down the years I’ve known many hundreds of situations where the generous giving of money would have changed the world for poor souls whose dreary existence was strangling them.

When you did that lovely thing, don’t you remember the wide eyes and the utter speechlessness? It was more than the money – the world became a different place, if only for a while. Unrelieved darkness was lifted with a warm light and despair was replaced with possibilities and hope. Maybe things *wouldn’t* always be as bad as they had been. At least once, these beaten people felt they mattered to someone. A job, a coat, a box of groceries, a debt paid, a friendship offered and hearts begin to sing.

Very often there’s money involved in this loveliness but it’s more than the money, isn’t it? Russian-born novelist, Ivan Turgenev tells how one day he met a beggar who asked for some money. “I felt all my pockets,” said the writer, “no purse, watch, or handkerchief did I find. I had left them all at home. The beggar waited, and his outstretched hand twitched and trembled slightly. Embarrassed and confused I seized the dirty hand and pressed it. ‘Don’t be vexed with me, brother, I have nothing with me, brother.’ The beggar raised his blood-shot eyes to mine, his blue lips smiled, and he returned the pressure of the chilled fingers. ‘Never mind, brother, he stammered, ‘thank you for this. This too was a gift, brother’.” Turgenev concludes, “I felt that I too had received a gift from my brother.” Yes, it’s *more* than money! When hearts reach out to hearts, whether it’s expressed in money or food or clothing or work, depending on the situation, people who aren’t too far-gone to recognize it know that they’ve been cared for.

This leads me to say we should never be ashamed to give what we have even if we have nothing tangible to give.

Turgenev and his begging brother have taught us that. If all you have is tears or an embrace or a kind word – if that’s it, give it, for people are hungry for more than food and long for more than a physical coat to keep out the cold. Who can say what a word of kindness from a tender heart can do for a soul right on the brink? Give what you have and God will see and maybe he’ll give you more to give.

God looked down at the land of Uz and saw the needs of countless people so he blessed the family of a man called Job with incredible wealth; he made the man’s fields simply burst with rich harvests; he made his flocks and herds multiply until the herdsmen and shepherds scratched their heads, not knowing where to put so many thriving animals; he made his investments generate money beyond the capacity of all his banks and made his commercial trading so successful that he became the greatest figure in the entire East.

Job knew very well where all his blessings came from. “The Lord gives!” he insisted. But he knew more than that – he knew the Lord and he knew why the Lord had given him such wealth and influence. Now *that* was life in the sunshine. Rolling in money but rich toward God this man exulted in the privilege of giving money away. Listen to the pleasure in his voice as he says: “*I made the widow’s heart sing.*” (29:13)

Don’t you love that? Imagine what must have been happening all over the place when this man got to work. The widow’s heartbroken and can’t stop crying. A thousand and one things need done and she isn’t able to handle the stress to make ends meet, her loneliness and grief drain her of energy, her pain leads her to wonder where God is and if he knows or cares about her.

Then down the street comes a smiling Job with a well-loaded cart. What did he say to her? What was his tone? Did he hug her without a word, respecting her suppressed sobs

and blessing her with silence until she was done? And when she finally poured out her heart did he listen intently, nodding and saying in that compassionate way I've heard my Ethel speak to so many, "I know, I know"?

When he was leaving, how much money did he press into her hand? Whose name did he give her that her oldest boy could go see about work, saying, "Mr. Job sent me"? How long did he watch approvingly while his servants piled her shelves high with necessities, quietly and very discreetly telling them "Yes, and give her some more...and some of that as well..."? What crushing debt did he commit to take care of right away with the words, "Leave that to me and don't give it another thought"? As she stared in wide-eyed joy at her change of fortunes did he give her his address and tell her to call on him at any time and at the gate ask for him personally? Are those the kind of things he said and did? God knows! But we know that when he left her, her heart sang!

And did his heart sing? Wouldn't yours? Knowing you've been the outstretched hand of God that banishes misery and brings relief, that obliterates gloom and brings hope for more than a day? *That's life in the sunshine!*

To be unashamedly rich and to love God because it's his pleasure to let you ease burdens and mend broken hearts so that they sing; to know you've been made a steward to help the helpless is to enter into the heart of God in a very significant way. It's too easy to develop a carping spirit about rich people and aren't there enough of the greedy and hoarding kind around to feed our cynicism? Of course there are, but those who work faithfully and wisely in such a position gain God's admiration and they should gain ours. Working with riches is, I would suppose, like working with volatile explosives. Money brings power – money *is* power and power is such a corrupting force; so powerful that Jesus

in a proverbial overstatement said the wealthy won't make it into the kingdom of God. Money, which is nothing more than the symbol of power, whether we have gobs of it or more modest amounts, is to be used wisely in the sight of heaven, Jesus taught us in Luke 16:9 (note the context all the way to the end of the chapter). In that section he wasn't speaking to or about the world's wealthy; he was making *all* his hearers stewards of their Father's money.

Many of us would be glad to swap places with the wealthy and wrestle with their problems for a change and that makes perfectly good sense. Just the same, for those who have hearts, being wealthy would have its own serious challenges. Should they give it all away? Should they give it all away and not be able to generate more to give away? What causes and how many should they give to? Which pleas are genuine? Which organization is wise and truly a way to get help to the needy? The sensitive rich could teach us much about these things (and someone should!).

Be all that as it may, there's no reason to believe that Job was a prisoner of conscience because he was rich and others were poor. He probably didn't have the time to think about it; he was probably too busy making hearts sing and lying at night planning his next contribution to making life warm and productive and leveling the playing field for so many in life. An interest-free loan here, a piece of family property redeemed there, a job interview arranged over there or a free night's lodging for travelers in one of his numerous houses. He wrestled with no nightmares and if he wasn't sure quite how to handle all the decisions he had to make, his dithering was the confusion of a man who didn't have all the answers on *how to do good*. God had been watching all this and with that delight that allows us to imagine him smiling and saying, "Let's see what he'll do with even more."

A bushel-worth of miracle! Singing hearts all over creation! This was life in the sunshine. More wonderful than all that, more wonderful than how he felt about God was the way God felt about him! "There's nobody like him!" If the cynical Satan had had the heart to see it, he would have seen one of the great glories of God's universe – a beautiful human being; brimful of life from God and spilling it everywhere he went.

A man with that heart almost makes you want to be rich. Almost!

They Scarcely Believed It

"When I smiled at them, they scarcely believed it; The light of my face was precious to them." Job 29:24.

Money is so commonly gained by immoral means the Christ spoke of it as if it were all tainted (see Luke 16:9, NJB). And such is the corrupting power of wealth that he said rich people wouldn't make it into the kingdom (see Matthew 19:24). Though he believed neither of these extremes, he was willing to risk being misunderstood if he could get across the danger there is in our handling wealth (and therefore *power*).

You understand it isn't money itself that's dangerous; it's just that we're so sinfully vulnerable that when we have power (of which money is the symbol) we're deceived and become corrupted. Having a lot of power (money) deceives many of us into thinking we're a cut above the rest of humanity. Even when we acknowledge that the money is from God, we still feel superior. We must feel superior, don't you see, because God gave us this power, rather than giving it to someone else. That must say something about our qualities and wisdom. And so we demand respect, marked respect, so the usual smiles and courteous

treatment aren't sufficient. We aren't like the common herd so we mustn't be treated in the ordinary way. If there's to be no groveling, there must at least be additional fuss or an over-the-top introduction, a more solicitous attitude, a more intense look of interest when we're delivering our opinions.

None of these undesirable reactions to wealth is seen in the man from Uz. We haven't even the slightest hint that he struggled with such temptations. The reverse is true! When he thinks of his servants he thinks of them as fellow-humans, on a par with himself, having God as their Creator just as he does. He feels this way not only about his male servants; he feels that way about his female servants also. In a world that treated women in abysmal fashion here was one who openly held them in esteem! Listen to him,

“If I have denied justice to my menservants and maidservants when they had a grievance against me, what will I do when God confronts me? What will I answer when called to account? Did not he who made me in the womb make them? Did not the same one form us both within our mothers?”
(31:13-15).

And he doesn't say this in a pompous way. Remember, under terrible pressure he feels compelled to sketch his character as seen in his past life. He isn't addressing a hostile feminist movement. In the course of this character sketch he mentions how he viewed his female servants. It's a "passing" remark and the more powerful because it isn't a studied statement geared for a particular group to gain its approval. No, money and position hadn't corrupted him; he remained humble, with a healthy view of everyone around him. He was no god, just another human into whose hands God had given riches and power.

When he approached to take his place in the seat of power in the city square, the young men stepped back and made a path for him. The aged rose from their seats as a token of their respect and the leading lights, the people with the power, even they broke off their speaking when the great man came into their presence (29:7-10). They were anxious to hear him speak and when he spoke, they didn't feel threatened. His words fell gently on their ears and everyone noted how well he expressed himself (29:10-11, 21-23). When their debates generated heat but little light, when they stirred up dust and choked one another's minds, his words came, they felt, "like spring rain" that softened the ground after a long blisteringly hot spell.

Was he powerful? Yes! As they walked the streets they hoped they would see him and if it happened he saw them and gave them a smile, it made their day. "When I smiled at them, they scarcely believed it; the light of my face was precious to them" (29:24). Perhaps you've had a memorable experience when someone who was far above you in office and status made a point of smiling or speaking. Don't you remember how delightful it was? What a lovely thing, what a very lovely thing they do, those who know they have power, when they brighten the day of people who live most of their lives unnoticed and without applause.

In Thomas Hauser's biography of Muhammad Ali, Harold Conrad, a boxing promoter, tells of the time he and Ali visited a women's prison in California. Of course the ladies were absolutely beside themselves with joy that this superstar would take the time and trouble and they'd get to see him. They were lined up to shake hands with him and get his autograph. Every now and then he would stop to kiss one of them – but let me let Conrad tell the rest:

And everyone he kissed was ugly. The first one he kissed, if they'd had an ugly woman contest, she would have won. He leaned over, hugged her and

kissed her, and she just about fainted. She was crying, "Oh, my God! He kissed me! He kissed me!" Then the next one...he kept kissing the ugly ones. Afterward, I asked him why, and he told me, "The good-looking ones ain't got no problem. But them ugly ones, who's gonna kiss them? If I kiss them, they've got something to talk about for the rest of their lives."

Reflect on that for a while and then ask yourself how these women felt when they went back to their cells after he had leaned over and kissed them? He permanently rescued them from oblivion and gave them a lovely memory to bring out and warm themselves by on days when life chilled them to the bone. "Someone noticed me. Someone took the time. Someone thought about me in a special way."

The singer and movie actor, Kris Kristofferson, has a similar story to tell. About taking time for people, Ali once told him: "You don't realize how much it means to these people. A lot of them have never met anybody famous." Then Ali went on to tell him that when he was a little boy his father took him to a tree that Joe Louis had leaned against in Louisville. That was when he first realized how much it could mean to someone to make contact with someone famous.

This is a fine sense of the situation. Neither Ali nor Job was taking himself too seriously. They just knew how lovely it is to be noticed and treated as though they mattered. In moments like these, position and power are being used to good effect. For all his many and serious faults Robert Burns the Scottish national poet never forgot his old friends and his humble beginnings. Even after he had been established as a big celebrity, wined and dined by lords and ladies, he would break off conversation in the street with some one in the upper echelons to say hello to an old