

## **Bible Study on Book of Job GUC**

### **Abstract for Job Bible Studies**

The Old Testament Book of Job asks the big questions. Does it provide any answers? This is less clear... certainly not the trite responses we so often hear in church circles. This Bible study series examines pastoral care themes in Job. It is a great work of literature expressing the anguish of belief.

**Week 1 “Between Heaven and Hell”** Introduction to the form of the book [prose and poetic dialogues], evidence of great literature, is it Jewish black humour? Irony. The invitation to ‘curse God and die’. Or to wrestle with God like Jacob?

**Week 2 “Taking God to Court: Integrity at What Cost?”** The forensic structure of the book with a central theme of issuing a subpoena to God to show up in court and justify his actions. The anger of Job against the injustice of his treatment by God. The path of integrity. What are the implications for us?

**Week 3 “The Risk of Transgressing Orthodoxy”** Job challenged the established orthodoxy of the Old Testament based on a covenant relationship with God. We will look at Job’s ‘four counsellors’ Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, with the late addition of Elihu. What was their message to Job and why did he reject it?

**Week 4 “Why do the Innocent Suffer?”** The question of innocent suffering is different for us. We have a post-enlightenment view of pain where the ancient Hebrews saw it in relational terms: a breach of the covenant. How is the New Testament, with the centrality of Jesus, different?

The studies will be on zoom: <https://uca-nswact.zoom.us/j/222916065>

All welcome, join at any time. Have a Bible on hand.

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**Rev Professor Bruce Stevens** (adjunct CSU) is supply minister at GUC. He is a clinical and forensic psychologist with a private practice. He has many peer reviewed papers in theology and biblical studies.

Dates 7pm Wednesday June 1, 8,15 and 22.

## Study 1: Between Heaven and Hell

*To Read: [Job Chapters 1-2](#). DISCUSS:* How do you approach Job? What are your preconceptions?

The Book of Job is a wonderful discovery. Surprise after surprise. Of course, most of us know the story in **outline**: A good man loses everything and after his trials God restores his fortunes as a reward for his patient endurance and tenacious faith. Hence the saying ‘the patience of Job’. But that is a half-truth. The book is much more interesting than a simple morality tale. **My goal** in this series is to introduce the ‘book’ beyond the ‘book’.

If every actor has to act Hamlet; every preacher has to preach Job. It is the place where we wrestle with the great questions that life presents. Life, as the philosopher said, is “fired at us point-blank” (Jose Ortega Y. Gasset).

### Great Literature

The Book of Job is widely accepted as a **great work of literature**. I think it should be counted with the greatest accomplishments of humanity: Homer’s Iliad, Shakespeare’s tragedies and Dante’s trilogy. Certainly, it belongs when you think about the next level of the pantheon: Chaucer, Cervantes, Milton, and Tolstoy. I try to read what has been identified as the Great Books of the Western Tradition and Job deserves a place. I also read popular ‘junk’ but those works do not help me to appreciate Job.

**Reflect:** Marooned on a deserted island. What books would you want with you? Why?

Job is an example of **wisdom literature**. In the Bible think of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs. We don’t know the author of Job but it was probably a courtier or diplomat: an educated person associated with aristocratic circles. There are not many ‘suspects’ when it comes to writing such as masterpiece. Who else had the education, time, and knowledge of the world? This was the group that produced most of the wisdom literature, which of course was not limited to Israel, but included Egypt and across the Middle East.

Job is hard to date, but probably after Israel was taken into exile. Job is introduced as a patriarchal figure from the heroic past. He is the epitome of piety, wisdom and social success. The opening scene is (Job 1:6-2:8).

The context of Job's suffering is given in the prologue. There is a **heavenly scene** in which Satan acted like a prosecutor, accusing Job of self-interest "does he fear God for nothing?" (1:9). Satan was given power to test Job: in a series of tragedies his sons and daughters die, raiders put his servants to the sword, and take all his wealth including his cattle and possessions. Job lost everything. This is followed by a second round of accusations by Satan and Job lost his health. He was inflicted with 'loathsome sores' from head to feet.

Not surprising, but there is a **tension between the divine plan and disorderly nature of earthly events**. God's boast about Job sets off a train of consequences. Two accounts of God and Satan and then Job's wife is introduced as a new figure in the plot.

The book of Job is carefully constructed. The motif of a religious hero who suffered unjustly is found in ancient Assyrian and Babylonian literature. It seems likely that a **story, in oral form** circulated before Job was written. While this has been lost, it formed the foundation of the book. The interactions of prologue and the prose conclusion suggests that neither was 'tacked on' but integrated with important themes that emerge in the poetic dialogues. Job was set in patriarchal times before Moses and the covenant relationship with God. In the poetic dialogues the names of God are El and Shaddai, not Yahweh. This gives a **more universal perspective**, as it were the struggle of every human to find meaning before God.

Look at the book in your Bible and you will see that there is a brief prose introduction and ending. The central chapters are set out differently, more like the psalms. This indicates **Hebrew poetry**. English poetry is distinguished from prose by rhythm and to a lesser extent rhyme. Most of Shakespeare is in iambic pentameter weak-strong with 5 stresses in the line: *To be or not to be*, etc. There are other poetic conventions but Hebrew poetry is marked by a repetition of ideas, which translates well. There are also interesting word plays which don't translate (*yam* sea and *yom* day in 3.8).

Job plays with the repetition of ideas. For example, Job 1.21 "Naked I came from my mother's womb and naked I shall return there." The verse appears repetitive but twists it to an image of birth and death – so creates ambiguity and a *double entendre* for naked.

There is glorious imagery is illustrated in the section in which God replies to Job, in the section beginning "Have you commanded the morning since your days began..." This leads to the lines:

It is changed like clay under the seal

And it is dyed like a garment. (Job 38:14).

Also Job 39: 19 “Do you give the horse its might? Do you clothe its neck with a mane [literally thunder].” This image brings in the sound of a horse running on hooves.

There is abundant irony, for example the term ‘hedge’, Job 3:23 “Why is light given to a man whose way is hid, whom God has hedged in.” But Satan has described to God the blessings of Job with “Hast thou not put a hedge about him and his house and all that he has on every side?” Such literary links point to the same author of prologue and dialogues at least in the OT form.

### **Beyond a morality tale**

The prose intro and ending are **very different to the extended poetic dialogues** that comprise most of the Book of Job. This format of a story and then the author’s contribution in the middle has been used (eg. Decameron, 1001 Nights, etc.). It provides a narrative plot to frame the literary centre.

The more you read and understand the differences it calls into question: **Why was this book written?** The prose ‘bookends’ are about a pious man tested by God and eventually rewarded. But the poetry is about almost cosmic indignation and rage against the way God *badly* orders his universe. It is not a pious vindication of either God or Job. The differences are so stark, that for a while I thought the best explanation was that it was **black Jewish humor**. The poetry with the dialogues between Job and his three ‘comforters’ and the mediator Elihu takes you on a wild roller coaster ride of Job’s rage, heights of sarcasm, and possibly even blasphemy. God is portrayed as an enemy with ironic titles such as “seeing eye” (7:8) and “Watcher of humans” (7:20). God is the enemy and a spy – an astonishing picture of God, certainly unique in the Bible (**read chapter 7**).

I follow Habel (1985) and others in believing the book is structured as a **forensic document**: a legal subpoena for God to show up in court to answer the charges laid by Job.

In the prologue Job may be idealized but there is a question about the portrayal of God – twice being willing to make a wager with Satan!

**Reflect:** How do you respond to this surprising view of God?

All this is **highly ironic** against the back-drop of discussions about whether there is a moral order in the universe. Both Job and his friends, devout defenders of orthodoxy, know nothing of the context of the divine wager with Satan.

I want to focus on this Job, in the prologue, and especially **Job's wife's advice** (2.9) to "Why do you persist in your integrity? Curse God and die!" He still had his wife but opinions differ as to whether this was a blessing. **Augustine** considered the wife to be Job's last torment. She was labelled *diaboli adjutrix* or Satan's ally. She is the human mouth-piece for the hidden Satan (Habel, p. 96).

The **theme of cursing** God is present from the beginning of the book. Job in the picture of his piety offered sacrifices early in the morning "It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts" (1.5). Satan's accusation was that if God removed his protection Job "He will curse you to your face". (1.11). Instead after the first tragedies, Job responded with "Blessed be the name of the Lord" (1.21). Again, Satan believed that if he was allowed to inflict Job "He will curse you (God) to your face" (2.5).

This **act of cursing** God is not simply a profanity to clear the air. The idea was that if a man cursed God, God would retaliate and the man would die. It was a willful act of self-destruction. More like the choice, "I will drink myself to death." But arguably quicker! So, Job refused any temptation to curse in the prose prologue 'Shall we receive the good from the hand of God and not receive the bad?' (2.10). Again irony: the poetic section opens with Job cursing! But more about that later.

**DISCUSS:** Any times you have felt let down by God? Were you angry? Did you feel cheated – even like cursing God.

### **To Curse or not to Curse?**

The **sufferings of Job are all encompassing**, losing everything: children, wealth, friends, community position and respect – finally his health. There is no comfort when everything has gone. Sometimes we face such a challenge to how we see life. It challenges our faith, our resources, our friendships, our family relationships – everything is tested and sometimes found wanting.

The choice is *in extremis*. Have you known such a 'dark night of the soul' when the choice was so stark? When 'Curse God and die' **seemed a real option**. When you have faced loss, tragic disappointments and possibly health crises. It is the choice of Job, do we 'Curse God and die'?

Chapter 3:1 “Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth”. This introduces a change in Job’s attitude and initiates the resulting conflict with his friends. A curse has the potential to open up the forces of darkness and chaos. It has the potential to rouse up the primal creature Leviathan (3:8).

I do **not want to trivialize** such an event. We may be disappointed if we don’t get a promotion but we will be devastated if we lose our job, erode our life savings and perhaps lose the self-image of being a good provider. Or it may be a **challenge of health**. I know of a woman who has lost her stomach through pancreatic cancer, it hurts to eat and it is a daily trial not to lose precious calories with overwhelming nausea. Or a man who foolishly had an affair, a ‘one night stand’. He lost his wife and his children will no longer speak to him.

Or the option of **Jacob** to ‘Wrestle with the God’ (Gen 32)? One is the path of despair and surrender to bitterness. The other calls for everything we have. Jacob would not let God go “unless you bless me” (32: 26). It is a journey that may not end well, most likely like Jacob we will be permanently wounded, but it is the way of Job portrayed in the rest of the book.

Maybe some of us will get through **life without such a trial of faith**, but at some point most of us will face the question of Job: Curse God and die or wrestle with God through the dark night of the soul.

## **Conclusion**

There is a scene in one of Elie Wiessel’s books, set against the backdrop of the Jewish ghetto during the Second World War, which depicts the removal of Jews from society. It involves a beadle who reports on the day’s events to God each morning, “It was the beadle’s custom to rush to the synagogue each morning, to ascend the bimah (a platform from which the rabbi reads the Bible) and shout first with pride, and then with anger: ‘I’ve come to inform you, Master of the Universe that we are here.’” Then came the first massacre, followed by many others. The beadle somehow always emerged unscathed. As soon as he could, he would run up to the synagogue and pounding his fist on the bimah he would shout at the top of his voice, ‘See, Lord, we are still here.’ After the last massacre he found himself all alone in the deserted synagogue. The last living Jew. He climbed the bimah one last time stared at the ark and whispered with infinite gentleness, ‘You see, I am still here.’ He stopped briefly before continuing in his sad, almost toneless voice: ‘but You, where are You?’

I have **no easy answers** if you are facing such a question today. Or tomorrow or any time soon. It is not easy to find the **courage** to maintain the struggle of faith. To refuse easy answers and enter uncharted theological 'waters'. And to continue until against all the odds, wrestling with a foe that is overwhelmingly powerful, being lost in utter confusion and even despair. And maybe in your blackest hour God might respond or you will come to some understanding. Nothing is certain. But this is exactly the **path of Job**. So as in a TV melodrama, I leave you with the 'cliff hanger': What will Job do? What will God do?

**References:**

Norman Habel, (1985). *The Book of Job: A commentary*. London: SCM.

## Study 2 Taking God to Court: Integrity, but at What Cost?

In a **Nazi concentration camp**, a contemptuous guard said to Jacob, “Jews deserve nothing but death.” Jacob replied, “Yes, Jews and bicycle riders.” The guard thought for a moment and responded, “Why bicycle riders?” Jacob asked, “Why Jews?” There is a distinctly Jewish kind of black humour that is born of maintaining a shred of dignity in seemingly hopeless situations. Jews and bicycle riders.

The book of Job might be one of the first examples of “**black Jewish humour**”. There is irony in abundance. The book begins and ends with a familiar story. Job “was blameless and upright, one who feared God” (1:1). He was betrayed as a victim of a wager between God and Satan, of which he knows nothing, and is tested with the loss of everything he held precious: his children, prosperity, community esteem and eventually his health “scraping his boils with pieces of potsherd”. Only his wife remained. According to St Augustine, she was the final torment “the *audiutrix diaboli* or assistant of Satan). She advised Job, “Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God and die!” (2:9) The meek saint held fast to his faith, proverbially with ‘the patience of Job’, and is finally rewarded with another seven sons, three daughters, 14,000 sheep, 6000 camels, and the thousand yoke of oxen and a thousand donkeys. He saw his children’s children to four generations. The book ends “and Job died, old and full of days.” (42:17). If this book was about pious examples and happy endings, there would be a little more to be said.

**Read Job 42 DISCUSS:** Reversals of fortune, what do you think?

In contrast to the prose beginning and end, the poetry chapters of the book of Job (chapters 3 to 43a) reveal a different Job. A man who **raged against God**. If, like Job we have been tested to our limits and shattered by tragedy, then perhaps we can understand that reaction. And there are lessons for our spiritual journey.

### **The Anger of Job**

**Job, in his anger, went far beyond** any line of religious decency. He did what no Jew would do. He cursed the day of his birth (3:1). He blamed God, “For the arrows of the Almighty are in me” (6:4). In his misery he taunted God, why did he not do things properly and finish him off? Surely “It would please God to crush me.” (6:9).

Joe felt as if he had been singled out for some kind of contest with a divine adversary. Quite reasonably he asked if the fight was fair? Was he one of the mythical monsters

of the deep, “am I the Sea (*Yamm*), or the Dragon (*Tannin*) that you set a guard over me?” (7:12, notice guard again) Such creators of primal chaos were the only opponents of God strong enough for a good contest. Job resorted to sarcasm, “Does it seem good to you to oppress?” (10:3) and undermined God’s wisdom with satire (12:13-25 **What kind of picture of God is this? Discuss**).

There is a parody of the famous **Psalm 8**, “What are human beings, that you make so much of them, that you set your mind on them, visit them every morning, test them every moment?” (7:17 - 18). Job uses the theme of chaos to subvert a hymn of creation, (9: 2-10), and some commentators have speculated whether Job crossed over into blasphemy (27:7) “May my enemy be as a wicked man, my adversary at law as a wrongdoer! (Habel’s translation; Who is his enemy? obviously God) My favourite is Job’s bitter humour, “He has kindled his wrath against me, and counts me as his adversary. His troops (angels) have thrown up siege works against me and encamp around my *tent*.” (19:11 - 12). Remember that Job’s health had deteriorated to the point of virtual paralysis.

Was Job’s reaction extreme? Well maybe. *But as the anguish of orthodoxy, not heresy*. I would compare it to the honesty and integrity of **C.S. Lewis writing after his wife Joy died** from cancer. He addressed God, “Already month by month and week by week, you broke her body on the wheel while she still wore it. Is it not yet enough? The terrible thing is that a perfectly good God is in this matter hardly less formidable than a cosmic sadist. The more we believe that God hurts only to heal, the less we believe that there is any use in begging for tenderness.” (*A grief observed*, page 35 - 36).

All this reminds us that **we see with different eyes when we are the one suffering**, or as Job said it, “In the thought of one who is at ease there is contempt for misfortune.” (12:5)

### **Litigation**

In contrast to his reputation, Job was not one to passively wait. He decided on a highly original, perhaps risky, course of action. He would take God to court, “I would speak to the Almighty, and **I desire to argue my case with God.**” (13:3)

Apart from the obvious difficulties with this plan, it is worth exploring some additional layers of meaning. Job challenged the ancient wisdom **that to see God is to die**. It was a risk he was willing to take to argue his case. Job also suspected that

it was futile, because God would unfairly use his superior power, “Though I am innocent, my own mouth would condemn me!” (9:20) he desired an impartial judge, but he or she would be hard to find, “There is no umpire between us, who might lay his hand upon us both” (9:33).

Nevertheless, Job went on. **He offered his testimony.** In the chapters 29-31 he pleaded his innocence and cried out for justice. He catalogued possible crimes (31:7-34) and challenged God to provide evidence (31:36-37). Eventually Job built up his **courage and issued a subpoena**, “Here is my signature! Let the Almighty answer me!” (31:35a) Is this insanity? Arrogance? Grandiosity? Self-righteousness? Was he ready to defy God rather than to deny his integrity?

**Silence. No response from God.** The silence is broken, by Ehilū the fourth comforter, (**Read Job 32: 1-10**) who in six chapters added nothing original or remotely helpful to Job. A classic literary anti-climax (32-37) from “a bombastic fool full of hot air” (Habel, p. 53, see 32:18-22). But finally, God does indeed turn up to court - unrepresented! There is not a trace of an answer to Job’s charges. Like one of Cicero’s famous defenses the legal issues were completely ignored and in Job the **ultimate question ‘why do the innocent suffer?’ is left unanswered.**

From the **whirlwind there came a series of unanswerable questions**, “I will question you and you shall declare to me.” God is subject and will not be an object to anyone. God asked, “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements, surely you know!” (38:1-5). What followed is some of the most glorious nature poetry in any language, but with an additional purpose. There are limits to human knowledge and understanding.

Job admitted that he did not fully understand “things too wonderful for me” and conceded that he was wrong, “I repent in dust and ashes” (42:6). But Job was validated in a surprising way. *The Lord said that only Job had spoken of him in the right way!* (42: 7) But is all this ironic, I wonder.

## **Integrity**

**Integrity is always tested.** It is never a given. In the early morning, when we have given up on sleep for the night and wait for the first sounds of insects and birds or in a moment of despair when everything we have worked for seems in ruins, or the nagging anguish of the loss of a loved one, now beyond our reach. We know what it

is to be alone and to struggle in hidden ways. Do we, in such moments to surrender to despair or demand an answer from God? Integrity is always tested.

**Chaim Potok** (1972) wrote an amazing novel *My Name is Asher Lev*. It is the story of an Orthodox Jew who grew up with an immense talent. He was apprenticed to a famous artist (I think of Mark Rothko) and then later establishes his own reputation. Asher comes to a place in a artistic creativity that the only symbol he can use to convey family pain is to paint a crucifixion. This is highly offensive to his orthodox Jewish family and friends. He explained, “Yes, I could have decided not to do it who would have known? Would it have made a difference to anyone in the world? That I would have felt a sense of incompleteness about a painting. Who would have cared about my silent cry of fraud? By itself is a good painting. Only I would have known.” A man with his artistic sense of integrity.

All this comes together in our spiritual life. That is why **Job is so important. He rejected the orthodoxy of his day**, eloquently conveyed in the speeches of his three comforters, and ventured where the way was not known, or safe, or even sensible. He embraced a kind of ‘**holy madness**’ guided only by his integrity. He knew that he would hold onto his integrity with an iron grip. Job cried, “Till I die I will not put away my integrity.” (27:5). Stick to your integrity, it is a better map when you go beyond the known.

Job was a devout man. He knew as much about God as anyone. He thought he had a grip on the assurances of his faith ‘live a good life, honour God, and all will be well.’ A contract of sorts. But it is a **primary school theology and eventually life will subvert it**. Job discovered that spirituality is not ultimately about dogma or rules, it is about a **relationship with God**. He went from a secondhand knowing about God, to knowing God, “now my eyes see you” (42:5).

We can learn from Job that faith is not passive resignation. It is a struggle in which integrity is tested – again and again.

**Discuss:** When has your integrity been challenged? Did you grow or change spiritually?

### Study 3 The Risk of Transgressing Orthodoxy

Abraham **Heschel** said, “In a very deep sense, religion is two things. First of all, it is an answer to the ultimate problems of human existence. Second it is a challenge to all the answers.”

There was an interview with **Elie Wiessel** in which the journalist quoted the following excerpt from his autobiography *Night*, “Never shall I forget that night, the first night in the camp, which is turned my life in one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath the silent blue sky. Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence was deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turn my dreams into dust. Never shall I forget those things, even if I’m condemned to live as long as God Himself, never.” The journalist thought that these words sounded like an those of a man without faith. Wiessel was surprised at this response to his position, and he explained himself in the following way. He said, “**I protest within faith not without faith.** It is permitted in the Bible to take God to task and to ask ‘What is happening to your creation? I’m doing that to this day’.” We have seen the truth of this in the Book of Job.

**Discuss:** Do you think God allows us to question? Do you think you can more easily question Jesus – who is seen as more approachable?

Now we will look at Job’s clash with his friends, orthodoxy and indeed the teachings of the Old Testament. There is a **profound difference in perspective** from someone suffering and others trying to explain misfortune. This is not lost on Job “In the thought of one who is at ease there is contempt for misfortune.” (12:5)

- (a) **Eliphaz** (Job 4-5, 15, 22) takes the role of a wise counsellor, a friend offering advice to Job the sufferer. His intention is to convince Job that restoration is possible is only he would follow his counsel, which is grounded in traditional teaching and personal experience. It is a role which Job himself has played in better times “You have instructed many and you have strengthened the weak hands” (4:3).
- (b) **Bildad** style is more cutting dismissing Job’s words as “your words be a great wind” 8:2 and uses images of two plants and shaky house (chapter 8, 18, 25)

- (c) **Zophar** castigated Job as wordy, glib and prattling as a fool “should a multitude of words go unanswered?” 11: 2 (chapter 11, 20, 27:13-23)

These three ceased “because Job was righteous in his own eyes.” (32:1)

**Discuss: Read the beginning of Eliphaz (Job 4-5).** What is the theological argument? Essentially the friends of Job argued:

- (a) Suffering is a punishment for sin (Eliphaz 4:7-9 “Who that was innocent ever perished?”);
- (b) Hope is in God alone, “Is not your fear of God your confidence, and the integrity of your ways your hope? (4:6);
- (c) Inevitable lot of frail mortals who have an inherent tendency for evil (15:14-6 “What is man that he can be clean?”) and no one can assume they are righteous (4:17);
- (d) Discipline by God (Elihu 33:15-28 “Man is chastened with pain upon his bed”, 36:8-15);
- (e) Part of a mysterious plan of God (Zophar 11: 5-11 “Can you find out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limits of the Almighty?” (11:7);
- (f) The proper response of a human is to pray, “As for me, I would seek God, and God I would commit my cause.” (Eliphaz 5:8);
- (g) God wounds but it’s only to heal, “Behold, happy is the man whom God reproves, therefore despise not the chastening of the Almighty. For he wounds but he binds up; he smites, but his hands heal.” (Eliphaz 5:17-18);
- (h) God is just, and he will reward the righteous, “if you are pure and upright, surely there he will rouse himself or you and reward you with the rightful habitation... Your latter days will be very great.” (Bildad, 8: 6-7);
- (i) Trust traditional wisdom, “Enquire, I pray you, of bygone ages and consider what the fathers are found; for we are but of yesterday, and no nothing, for our days on earth are a shadow” (Bildad, 8: 8-9);
- (j) He should fear God, “But you are doing away with the fear of God, and hindering meditation before God” (Eliphaz, 15:4);
- (k) Look to God for his consolations, “Are the consolations of God too small for you, or the word that deals gently with you? Why does your heart carry you away, why do your eyes flash, that you turn your spirit against God and that such words go out of your mouth?” (Eliphaz, 15: 11-13);
- (l) The ungodly get their just desserts (Bildad, chapter 18);

(m) Any gain of the wicked is brief, “the exalting of the wicked is short and the joy of the godless is but for a moment?” (Zophar, 20:5).

**Discuss:** What was your childhood or early faith like? Has it changed over the years? How has this happened? Are the questions different or the answers?

I had a **conversion experience** after dropping out of university (about 1970). I was a fundamentalist for a few years but mercifully that has passed with nearly 50 years of life experience. I still have traditional Christian beliefs, expressed in say the Apostolic or Nicene Creeds, *but how I believe is different*. I knew I had changed but reading James Fowler’s stages of faith helped me to appreciate that I arrived at a paradoxical understanding of religious truth. It was no longer either-or. To use a well-worn topic of debate in the church: predestination or free will, it could be equally both. This both-and approach just made sense and I held to my traditional beliefs with what philosopher Paul Ricoeur called a ‘second naivety’. So, I reconcile the debate between orthodox-progressive with an affirmation of *both!*?!

**Discuss:** Do you have a place for paradox in your faith understanding?

## Study 4 Why do the Innocent Suffer?

### Introduction

Questions are most important. Peter Ustinov told the story of a **Jewish patriarch** who was leaving Russia with all he had. Jacob was stopped on the border by a Russian guard who found a wrapped parcel, very heavy and asked “What is that?” The Jew said, “Don’t ask what is that? Ask who’s is that? It is Lenin’s statue and every day I give him thanks.” The guard said to proceed. Jacob got to the border of Israel and another guard asked the same question, “What is that?” Jacob said “Ask not what but who. It is Lenin’s statue and every day I will curse him.” The guard said to enter. Jacob is at home in Israel and his 10-year-old grandson asked, “Who’s is that?” The old man said, don’t ask who’s is that, ask what it is ... It is 10 kg of gold.”

When we read the book of Job there is a **central question obvious to all: Why suffering?** While this is obvious, it is impossible to read the book of Job except through ‘modern eyes’. The risk in doing what is natural is to miss everything: the art of what is said, the theological context and any point the author is attempting to make.

**Discuss:** Have you had friends or family who have asked how can you believe in a God that allows pointless suffering? The child with cancer? How did you respond?

### A Modern Problem

There is a problem of suffering being addressed in Job, but **is very different from what we see as difficult**. We see the problem framed by the philosopher **David Hume** (d. 1776), who in his *Dialogues* asked, “Is God willing to prevent evil but is not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able but not willing, then he is malevolent. He is both able and willing? Whence he is evil.” This boils down to: Can God be both all-powerful and good? **This remains ‘the big question’ against belief** and most thoughtful Christians would agree that it a genuine challenge to faith.

But that is not the question of Job. He had an **Old Testament world view**. Well let me be more accurate and say that the Book of Job was set patriarchal times as a literary device, before Moses and a covenant relationship with God, but the readers shared the assumptions of the Old Testament. So, Job was a model of faithful living, scrupulous in his religious observance, with daily sacrifices offered on the chance of one of his children *might* have sinned (1:5). **Job fulfilled his side of the covenant relationship with God**. But a series of bad things happened to this good man: loss

of wealth, servants, his sons and daughters through a series of sudden disasters. Then Job lost his health and became bedridden with sores, “from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head” (2:7). Only his wife survived and she told him to “curse God and die!”

The problem for the Old Testament reader of Job was not Hume’s metaphysical dilemma, but a **perceived break in the covenant relationship with God**. The assumed deal was: keep the covenant, do what God expects, and you will be protected by God and prosper. An OT version of the prosperity gospel! Clearly, this didn’t happen to Job (initially). Why? This is highly confusing and led to the clashes of Job with his three ‘comforters’. Job began by cursing the day of his birth (3:1-10), continued with a traditional lament and then we have cycles of the speeches of his friends [to correct Job!].

We are introduced to Job’s three friends. **Eliphaz** said, “Think now who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the righteous cut off?” (4:7). He presented sophisticated arguments that all people sin, so not even the righteous can complain (5:6-7), and suffering can be a discipline which is a mark of love (5:17). **Bildad** was a traditionalist and more confronting, “Does God pervert justice?” (8:3). In his view that the wicked construct a fragile house from false confidence (8:15). **Zophar** ‘took the gloves off’ and attacked, “Know that God exacts less of you than your guilt deserves” (11:6). All the comforters invite Job to repent and come back to a right relationship with God.

Essentially the **comforters accused Job being a hidden sinner**, and this was the only possible explanation for the curses of God to have come upon him. We can appreciate that Job’s comforters were perfectly orthodox in their theological argument and represented the general perspective the Old Testament. Job, in contrast, was wandering from the fold of orthodoxy. This is part of the genius of the book. It is a nuanced investigation of a problem for ancient Hebrew believers. Followers of the covenant still suffered bad things in life, why? This is a question much closer to the concern of the writer of Job.

The irony is heavy on the book. For example, **the reader knows that what Job does not: that God and Satan have a kind of heavenly wager**. Satan challenged Job’s motives as self-serving and is allowed to test Job through the series of disasters, to take everything, but not to take his life. How satisfactory is this as an answer? If you lost your child through an accident you would not want to consider yourself an object

of a heavenly wager. You might be persuaded that the philosopher David Hume had a point that such a God was not worthy of respect, certainly not love and worship.

This illustrates the **bind we get into when we try to give facile answers to life's deepest problems**. Job's friends started well, "They raised their voices and wept aloud; they tore their robes and threw dust in the air upon their heads. They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw his suffering was very great." (2:12-13). People tend to be critical of Job's comforters but I have trained a **few generations of clinical psychologists** and very few would wait 7 days to begin CBT with Job! One thing we learn from the dialogues between Job and his friends is that their attempts to find answers do not work and just aggravate Job's distress.

Many readers of the book of Job have found an answer in the end of the book, when ironically God did respond to the subpoena to face Job. But the irony continued with the **great questions put to Job, "Where were you when..."**

The man who challenged God is challenged by God, "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you and you shall declare to me." (38:2-3) God speaking from the whirlwind continued, "where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me if you have understanding." (38:4)

**READ:** Break group into 4 chapters, what is God saying to [Job in Chapter 38, 39, 40, 41](#). **DISCUSS** what is the point God is making?

Is there an answer to any of Job's questions? **God is subject [who asks questions], not object!** Job was reconciled to the Almighty on God's terms alone. Ironically it was Job who was found to be right about God, "My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends [Elihu is forgotten]; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has." (42:7)

Unlike the ancient Greeks, the **Hebrew mind was not speculative**. We consider the prophets, "They felt truths intuitively and asserted them with unshakeable certitude" (Gordis). The curious thing is what **Von Rad**, Old Testament scholar, noted that Job was certain that God was involved in his suffering. This truth leads to a different understanding in the New Testament.

**The New Testament Church**

The question of suffering was not acute in the earliest church. It was a persecuted minority in Judaism, just another mystery-like religion in a sea of paganism. The **early church expected nothing but persecution – in other words to suffer for their belief in Christ**. This did not change until Christianity became the established religion under Emperor Constantine. Even then the church was persecuted a few times when later emperors reverted to paganism such as Julian the Apostate.

One of the most influential books in the Middle Ages was written by **Boethius (d. 524)**. This was called *The Consolation of Philosophy*, which is on my shelf. This contains the idea of a Wheel of Fortune which essentially asserts ‘what goes up must come down’. It would hardly console us to see things differently, unless we are thinking about politicians!

We are still largely shaped, if we believe in God, by the **God of the 18<sup>th</sup> century deists**. A personal God but who dwells in splendid isolation. One of the greatest 20<sup>th</sup>-century theologians Jurgen **Moltmann** wrote his influential book *The Crucified God* (1973). Here we see a God who suffers with his people. **Dietrich Bonhoeffer** said, “God lets himself be pushed out of the world and on to the cross, He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, which He is with us and helps us.”

This also rewrites the question from *Why does an all-powerful God, who is good, allow suffering?* to *Why would an all-powerful God suffer with his people?* Neither question leads to a clear answer but the second conveys a sense of emotional meaning to the experience of suffering.

**Discuss:** The idea of God who suffers with us?

## **Conclusion**

**Julian of Norwich** wrote, “I saw that our faith is our light in our night, which light is God our endless day.” The vision of God transforms because:

- We understand the truth at a deeper level and can begin to see the bigger picture.
- This brings a new integration. The old parts may still be in tension, but there is now an appreciation of the whole.

This vision is beyond words, you see and understand. In *extremis* Job found that God gave a vision and offered a relationship. As one commentator said: “**What cannot**

**be comprehended through reason, must be embraced in love.” (Gordis) Job is theology from the place where words cease.**

**Rev Professor Bruce Stevens** (adjunct CSU) was a Minister-in-association at Wesley, employed part-time to assist with pastoral care. He now serves as a supply minister at GUC. He is a clinical and forensic psychologist with a private practice. Contact: [bstevens@csu.edu.au](mailto:bstevens@csu.edu.au) or 0403529773.