

The Book of Job

Session 1: Interpretation Problems and False Ideas about the Book

By John Walton

This is Dr. John Walton and his teaching on the Book of Job. This is session 1: Interpretation Problems and False Ideas about the Book.

Introduction [00:24-2:06]

Hello, I'm John Walton. I teach Old Testament at Wheaton College. I've been here for about 15 years. Before that, I taught at Moody Bible Institute, where I taught for 20 years. I did my Ph.D. work at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, which prepared me well for the kinds of things that I do. Basically, I'm a text guy; that is, I analyze texts, whether it's Hebrew texts or texts of the ancient Near East. I try to bring those together to help us understand the Bible better.

We're going to be looking at the Book of Job together. The Book of Job is a very difficult book. It's unique, not only within the pages of the Old Testament but within the entire ancient world. There's nothing quite like the Book of Job. Although certainly, there are some things that overlap with it at one point or another.

We're going to be trying to understand the book as a whole, as well as the book in its various parts. So that's what we will be working at as we think together about the Book of Job and what it offers us.

So, let's get started. I want to start by just talking about some of the problems we face when we deal with the Book of Job. There are interpretation problems all around, and there are false ideas. There are things that people tend to think about in the Book of Job that put them on the wrong path right from the start. So, we want to pick those up at the beginning of this series and try to make sure that we're aiming in the right direction.

What does Job say? [2:06-3:32]

The first problem to deal with is what does the book actually say? The Hebrew in the Book of Job is the most difficult Hebrew in the Old Testament. It's been a problem.

There are many words that occur only once in the Hebrew Bible that we encounter in the Book of Job. There's difficult syntax. There are all kinds of difficulties in understanding the meanings of words and their use. So, our first task is translating a very difficult Hebrew book.

Even once we get to the point of translation, then we have to ask the question about literature. How did the author package the book? How did you put it together to make it work?

Some people have thought that the Book of Job is a patchwork quilt, that some parts weren't originally, and then it built gradually over time as different parts were added. And sometimes, they even think that those parts might be contradictory to one another. I'm not of that opinion. I tend to think of Job as a unified whole coherent text, but that takes some work to try to think through what it is doing literarily. How has the author put this book together to make it work? And so, we'll be taking a look at some of that as we go along.

Philosophical/Theological Issues [3:32-4:32]

The next thing we have to deal with is the whole idea of the philosophical issues; the theological points that the book is making. We're well aware that in the Book of Job, some of the speakers are wrong. They are there to be wrong. Job's friends do not have the truth. Sometimes they have some of the truth. Sometimes they even have a lot of the truth, but it's inherently problematic what they are doing. And so, we have to be able to pick out: how does the theology of the book work? How does it do what it does? And so the philosophical/theological aspect is very important to us.

Once we get there, we have to move to the topic of, okay, fine for the theology of the book itself, what about for Christian theology--Christians today? How should we read the book? What does it have to offer us?

False Expectations [4:32-5:42]

Now, some of the misplaced expectations about the book make it difficult for the book to deliver. Some people will read through the book expecting that this will be a book that will tell them about suffering and how they can understand why they are suffering. And they get to the end of the book, and they read God's speeches, and they are puzzled. What's going on here? And then Job just gets all this stuff back, and the book ends.

People feel so unsatisfied because they say that hasn't told me anything. What's the book got to deliver? If you go to the book of Job, thinking that you are getting an answer to why there is suffering in the world or in your life, you're going for the wrong reason. And you are going to be disappointed. It's not going to tell you that.

1) Job has trials. Job is not on trial [5:42-7:48]

So, let's take a look at some of the things that the book does and doesn't do. First of all, Job has trials. Job is not on trial. Job thinks he's on trial. His friends think he's on trial, but the book really makes it clear from the start that Job is not on trial. After all, what kind of trial would it be when he's exonerated in the first couple of verses? And when the major characters all the way through, continue to insist that Job's not the problem here. So even though Job has trials, he is not on trial.

Job thinks that he's the defendant in a criminal case, that he's been accused of wrongdoing, and that he's being punished for it. And so, he feels like he's a defendant in a case where he's on trial. Job tries to switch that around. He tries to set it up so that he's a plaintiff in a civil case; that is, he claims that he's been wronged, that he's been treated inappropriately, and that there's some compensation that's due him--a change in direction. So, he tries to switch things so that he's not a defendant but a plaintiff. It's an interesting little change of strategy. But in fact, neither is correct. We find out as readers, and Job never finds this out, by the way. We find out, as readers, that Job is the star witness for the defense. So, he has a different role from what he thinks or the people around him think he's in. So, remember that Job has trials, but he's not on trial.

2) Job is not about Job. It's about God [7:48-9:31]

The second point, some people start out with this book and they say it's a Book of Job. And therefore, they, kind of understandably, imagine that the book is about Job; that the book is all about Job. It's not. The book is about God. Job is a main character. Job plays a significant role, but the book is more about God than Job. At the end of the book, it doesn't matter what we think about Job; it matters what we think about God. So, as we approach the book, remember we're looking for what it has to teach us about God, not what it has to teach us about Job.

We should not approach the book thinking the Job is going to stand as a role model, either a role model for suffering, for patience, for interaction, or for anything. Job is not a role model here. Job is kind of caught in something bigger than himself, and his responses are sometimes good ones, sometimes bad ones; sometimes it's hard to tell. But this book is not here so that Job can be a role model for us. It is a wisdom book, and it's to give us wisdom, and wisdom is ultimately about God. So that was point number two; it's more about God than about Job.

3) Job is not about God's justice; it's about God's wisdom [9:31-13:05]

Number three, we often read the book thinking that it's going to help us understand how God's justice works in the world. That it's a book about God's justice that it seeks to defend God's justice. And again, I would say, no, I don't think it does. That's not what it's doing. You'll notice that in the end, when God has his say, he doesn't defend his justice. He never explains the scenario that is unfolded in terms of justice. If you're looking at something to get something from the book of Job that actually helps you understand God's justice, again, you will walk away disappointed because the book does not explain or defend God's justice. Job's accusations against God concern God's justice. Our questions about suffering often concern God's justice, but the Book of Job does not defend God's justice. Instead, it defends his wisdom. This is a wisdom book, not a justice book. It defends God's wisdom because that's what we rely on.

If we think that it defends his justice, then we, at every turn we're trying to justify, vindicate, somehow explain, defend. And for all of that, we would need to have all the information. Justice cannot be done without all the information on the table. If we hear about some verdict and a famous trial in court, it does us no good to sit and talk about whether we think justice was done or not if we don't have all the pieces of evidence before us. The judge has the evidence. The jury has the evidence, but we rarely do. And therefore, it's difficult to conclude that justice was or was not done. And with God, we can never have all the information. We are not in a position to try to talk about whether God is just or not.

In fact, that entire framing has problems. The minute that we say God is just, we have implied that there is some outside category called justice, and the God conforms to it. Theologically, God does not conform to anything because that would suggest contingency that somehow there's something outside of him that he has to measure up to. And that's not true about God. God is not contingent. So, to say God is just might imply an outside kind of standard. It's better to say that justice flows from God. But again, we never find out how all of those criteria work. So, in that regard, the book is not about justice. It's about God's wisdom.

4) Job is not about suffering; it's about how to think about God when we're suffering [13:05-14:33]

Number four, the book does not intend to teach us how to think about suffering. Sufferings are, and no matter what level we experience it or observe it, it's hard. We'd love to have explanations, but this book is not designed to help us to know how to think about suffering. It's designed to help us know how to think about God when we are suffering. That's what we really need to know. How do I respond to God? Do we blame him? Do we grow angry with him? Do we ignore him? Do we run away from him? What do we do? How do we think about God when the world's going wrong all around us? When our lives are just going downhill, everything's going south; how do we respond to God?

After all, it's easy to think: he should be able to fix this. It's easy to think with Job and his friends: do we deserve this? If not, then what's going on? Again, the book is to help us understand how to think about God when we are suffering. And that goes back to a point we made earlier that it's about God, not about Job.

5) Job is not about getting answers; it is about trusting God [14:33-16:08]

Point number five, lots of times, we read the book of Job to try to get answers, answers that might explain our own suffering; answers that might explain suffering we see in the world. Why is the world such a difficult place? And so, we think that the Book of Job might give us answers. We hope that. We would really like answers. And so, we go to the Book of Job, looking for answers. Therein lies the problem because the book is more about trusting than it is about answers. You don't need to trust if you know all the answers. Trusting is our response to God when we don't know what's going on. When we can't figure things out ourselves, trusting is a response to our ignorance and our confusion. It's then we need to turn to God. The Book of Job is not going to give answers. It's going to call on us to trust.

6) Job is not about why or how to suffer; it's about our righteousness [16:08-17:24]

Finally, number six, the book is more about what constitutes righteousness than about why we suffer. Remember the question that's put on the table right in the first chapter is posed to God: Does Job serve God for nothing? It's really a question that asks about what motivates Job's righteousness. Does his righteousness really stand up to the test? After all, if Job's behaving the way that he does, you know, righteous, upright, turning away from evil, if he's doing all of that, just because he expects to get prosperity and reward from it, then it's not going to stand up when all of the good benefits are taken away; that so-called righteousness is just going to dissolve in the wind.

The Message of Job [17:24-19:12]

So, this is a book about righteousness. It doesn't tell us how to suffer. It challenges us to be righteous even when we are suffering. It challenges us to be righteous because righteousness is what should characterize our lives. It calls us to be faithful to

God because God is God not because he's generous. God is not a vending machine. And so, the question here in the book is what motivates people to be righteous. Suffering is simply the way that righteousness is tested in the Book of Job. Suffering is there to discover whether Job's righteousness is real or not.

So, by the time we reach the end of the book, we shouldn't be expecting to find out why am I suffering? We should expect to find out: am I truly righteous? Am I righteous for the right reasons instead of the wrong reasons? Does my righteousness stand the test of suffering? That's what the book's going to help us figure out. That's really what's going on with Job.

Review: Six Points [19:12-21:10]

So, let me review these six points. Job has trials, but he's not on trial. The book is more about God than it is about Job. The book is more about God's wisdom than about his justice. The book is not about how to think about suffering but how to think about God when we are suffering. The book is more about trust than about answers. And the book is more about what constitutes righteousness than about why we suffer.

These six points will help us to set aside false conceptions, misconceptions, and false expectations that we might have in the Book of Job. These six questions will help us to focus on what the book actually is doing. We'll be able to see more clearly how it is doing those things. Expectations are important. If we set up false expectations of life, of one another, of God, of the world; if we set up false expectations, then we're bound to be disappointed. So, we need to think about how God really operates, and the Book of Job can help us with that. So, let's look into its pages together to try to understand the message of the book.

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