

Dr. John Walton, Job, Session 24, 6-min. Video Overview

BiblicaleLearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Welcome to this explainer. Today we are completely upending the cultural myth of Job. You know, the idea of Job as this ultimate righteous sufferer.

We're going to dive into a seriously eye-opening analysis by Dr. John Walton. If you grew up hearing this story, you were probably taught he's the absolute gold standard for handling tragedy. Well, brace yourself, because we're challenging that perspective.

When we actually dig into the text, we find out Job is, literally, a cautionary tale. Okay, let's just lay out a quick roadmap so we can tackle this theological mystery step by step. We'll look at the actual problem with Job, break down the difference between righteousness and ritual piety, explore this fascinating thing called the Great Symbiosis, uncover Job's one saving grace, and then finally get to the book's true message.

So, starting with part one, the problem with Job. It's time to just completely shatter the biggest illusion about this guy. You probably always thought Job was the absolute perfect role model for handling pain, right? But Dr. Walton's work brilliantly shows us how Job's mindset is actually just another wrong way to respond to suffering.

He's actually illustrating inadequate wisdom for us. His ideas about why he suffers, mostly that God is somehow unjust, and his big solution, which is to aggressively confront God, are both totally off-base. We really have to be careful not to read this ancient text thinking we're supposed to follow his lead.

And this is absolutely crucial to understand. Job is a deeply flawed character, and his entire purpose in the narrative is just to raise the questions, not to hand us the solutions. It's like he's the setup, not the punchline.

He isn't actually being commended for how he responds to his unimaginable pain. Instead, he presents the profound problem of the text. He basically opens the door so we can learn exactly what not to do when our entire world comes crashing down.

To really get why Job gets it so wrong, let's jump into section 2 and look at righteousness versus ritual piety. Now, when we say the word piety today, we usually think of, you know, pure devotion, love, that sort of thing. But back in the ancient Near East, piety was basically a paranoid insurance policy against petty deities.

People did these elaborate ritual performances just to pamper the gods. It was a safeguard against their really fragile egos and their crazy volatility. Doing all these rituals was seen as the absolute bare minimum you had to do just to stay on their good side.

And this is where it gets incredibly fascinating with Job. Even though his righteousness genuinely set him apart, his fastidious rituals reveal a ton of underlying fear and vulnerability. Right in chapter 1, we see Job obsessively offering sacrifices for his kids just in case they accidentally messed up and offended God.

What does that tell us? It shows Job actually suspects God is unpredictable, easily offended, and frankly, kind of petty. Like God is just waiting to strike over a minor technicality. Which brings us to our third section, the Great Symbiosis.

This is the ancient psychological framework that is completely driving Job's actions. Think of the Great Symbiosis as this massive cosmic transaction. The ancient mindset was essentially this.

We, humans, pamper the gods with sacrifices, and in exchange, the gods are obligated to give us comfort, prosperity, and safety. You scratch the divine back, they scratch yours. It was a totally transactional system focused entirely on extracting benefits.

And that brings us to the ultimate detective question of our whole explainer today. Does Job serve God for nothing? Seriously, is he motivated by actual righteousness? Or is he just playing the Great Symbiosis game? Is he doing the rituals just to get the perks? Because if he's not doing it for the gain, what is driving him? The text is intensely focused on figuring out whether human devotion is just about getting something in return. Because Job has this snaky suspicion that God is capricious, he makes some seriously incorrect assumptions.

He basically acts as if God's favor goes to the highest bidder of piety. And here's a key detail. When the challenger in the heavenly court questions Job's motives, it isn't just pure malice.

When you look at Job's paranoid, over-the-top rituals, the challenger makes a perfectly logical inference. He thinks Job is simply buying God's protection. The challenger has totally valid reasons to suspect Job is just working the system.

So under the intense pressure of his suffering, and especially when characters like Elihu scrutinize him later, Job's fatal flaw is just staring us right in the face. The guy is incredibly self-righteous. It's one thing to be righteous, which, fair enough, the text says he is compared to everyone else around him.

But it's a completely different, dangerous thing to become self-righteous about it. Let's look at how this builds into a seriously toxic progression. First, Job becomes obsessively confident in his own absolute innocence.

He's desperate to be declared innocent of anything that might have caused his ruin. Second, because he thinks he played the transactional game perfectly, he ends up setting himself higher than God. And third, the absolute worst part, Job is so committed to his own innocence that he is literally willing to tear down God's justice just to maintain his own standing.

He's basically shouting, I am right, which means God has to be wrong. Now, Job fails on a lot of levels here. But moving into section four, we do find the one crucial thing he actually gets right.

Throughout this whole nightmare, Job's wife and his friends are telling him to just give up. They want him to curse God or just admit he must have botched the ritual system somehow. If Job had listened to them, it would have proved the challenger was right along.

It would have shown he only served God for the perks. But by rejecting that awful advice and keeping his integrity, Job does something huge. He proves he actually does serve God for nothing.

All the are totally gone, but he still refuses to just abandon the relationship. He proves his devotion wasn't entirely transactional after all. Okay, let's tie all of this together as we hit our final section, the book's true message.

If you only remember one thing from this explainer, let it be this massive paradigm shift. The book of Job is not about Job. It is about God.

Job isn't the star of the show. He's really just another character who gets a whole lot of things wrong. Sure, he's a guy who had a lot going for him and did some things right, but he makes massive fundamental theological mistakes.

So what are we supposed to take away from all this? First off, Job's responses to his trauma are definitely not models for us to copy. We really need to stop putting him on a pedestal as the perfect sufferer. What the text is actually doing is guiding us on how to properly think about God.

Think about it. Job was the guy with the best possible chance of getting it right, and even he failed to respond well when things fell apart. The book is using his failures to teach us how to respond better when our own lives inevitably go sideways.

I want to leave you with this final kind of provocative thought. Suffering is pretty much guaranteed in this life. It's going to happen to all of us.

So when your world falls apart, are you going to fall into that ancient trap of the great symbiosis? Are you going to retreat into self-righteousness and accuse God of being petty? Or will you learn from Job's profound mistakes, drop the transactional mindset entirely, and find a much deeper, better way to respond? Thanks for hanging out with me for this explainer. Keep learning, and I'll see you next time.