

Dr. John Walton, Job, Session 26, 6-min. Video Overview

BiblicaleLearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Okay, let's jump right into this explainer. Today we're tackling one of the absolute most unsettling mysteries in ancient literature, the seemingly terrible behavior of God in the book of Job. Now, if you've ever read it, you already know it presents a picture of the divine that can be, well, deeply uncomfortable.

We're going to be looking at some really incredible insights from Dr. John Walton to try and unpack exactly what is going on here. Because let's be honest, on the surface, it's a remarkably challenging text. I mean, if you just do a casual reading of the text, God kind of looks like a cosmic villain.

Consider his actions for a second. He seemingly has to ask what the challenger is up to. He literally wagers with a man's life.

He ruins Job without cause by his own admission, by the way, which includes wiping out his entirely innocent family. And then when Job repeatedly begs for some kind of explanation for why his life has been totally destroyed, God ignores him. Instead, God shows up and intimidates him with this massive I am God, and you are not speech, talking about legendary creatures like Behemoth and Leviathan.

And then he just gives Job his wealth back with zero explanation. So it forces us to ask a deeply uncomfortable question. Is this really God's actual revelation of himself? How could anyone possibly worship a figure who behaves this way? Dr. Walton points out that it would look almost comical if it wasn't so completely devastating to the human beings involved.

It is perfectly natural for us as readers to struggle with this depiction of God. All right, moving into section one, a rhetorically shaped character, rethinking the narrative. To solve this problem, we really need to shift our perspective.

Instead of asking if this is God revealing his actual psychological profile, we need to ask what this specific book is trying to reveal about God. So here is the crucial point. God, just like Job, his friends, his wife, and even creatures like Behemoth and Leviathan, is operating as a literary character shaped by the author.

They are all what we call rhetorically shaped characters. The author is constructing a scenario, basically a massive philosophical thought experiment, and the characters are given specific roles to make that experiment work. Let's break that down a bit.

On the surface, when God asks the challenger, have you considered my servant Job, it kind of seems like God has to find out what Job's actual motivations are. Like, does God involve himself in a wager because he genuinely doesn't know if Job serves him for nothing? Absolutely not. The literary reality is that God has zero uncertainty about Job.

The author is just using the conventional ancient thinking of a heavenly council as a literary device. It kicks off an investigation not for God, but for us. You know, the readers.

The text is offering answers to our own questions about how God's justice interacts with human suffering. That brings us to section two, the literary setup. Why the extremes? Because to make this philosophical thought experiment actually work, the author had to push the narrative to the absolute limits.

Think about the variables of loss that Job experiences. It's total devastation. He loses his wealth, his family, and his health.

But why did it have to be so extreme? Well, Dr. Walton explains it like this. If Job had only lost his wealth but kept his family, we couldn't really test the core issue. We'd just say, well, at least he has his family, so of course he still praises God.

If he lost his wealth and family but kept his health, we'd say, well, at least he has his life. Dr. Walton sums this up perfectly. Nothing less than a total loss would provide the necessary factors for the wisdom instruction.

For this specific conversation about pure, unrewarded righteousness to even happen, Job has to lose absolutely everything. The extreme exaggeration of his suffering, which matches the extreme exaggeration of his initial wealth and righteousness, by the way, is actually our telltale sign. It's a giant neon sign pointing to the fact that we are dealing with a carefully constructed literary scenario.

Okay, section three, the parable connection. Normalizing the extreme, because believe it or not, this kind of extreme literary characterization wasn't actually unique to the book of Job. It was a really familiar teaching tool.

Think about the parables of Jesus for a second. In the parable of the unmerciful servant, God is represented by a master who hands a servant over to be tortured. In the late-night request, God is portrayed as a reluctant sleeping neighbor who has to be badgered and nagged into helping.

In the workers in the vineyard, he's a landowner paying seemingly unfair wages. Now, in none of these parables do we assume God is actually a torturer or asleep or unfair, right? We know the characters are exaggerated to make a very specific theological point. We don't use those stories to compile a literal psychological profile of the divine.

And that brilliantly illustrates exactly what's happening in Job. Jesus' parables mix realistic issues with unbelievable extremes. The book of Job mixes deeply relatable human suffering with an extremely unresponsive, heavily dramatized God.

Just like we don't assume God actually wants us to be shrewd, cheating managers like in Luke 16, we shouldn't assume the God of Job is actually heartless just because the literary mechanism of the story requires him to be silent for 30 chapters. Which leads us right into section four, the true message, beyond simple equations. This ultimately explains why God refuses to just sit down and answer Job's questions at the end of the story.

Job tries over and over to draw God into a courtroom setting to demand an explanation. But giving an explanation would completely destroy the message of the book. Think about it.

If God simply handed Job a neat little divine equation like, " Hey, Job, you suffered X because of Y, it would imply that God's justice operates on a simple transactional level that human beings can easily master. But the entire message of the book is that God's justice absolutely cannot be reduced to that. I just love this quote from Dr. Walton.

He says, the point is not that God is unapproachable; the point is that he is irreducible. In the Psalms, we see a God who is deeply approachable, who welcomes our cries and our tears. But in Job, God is portrayed as an awe-inspiring, untamed creator of monsters.

This intimidating posture is a literary means to a theological end. It completely shatters the idea that we can put God into a neat, predictable box. So when we strip away all the literary mechanisms, what does the book of Job actually teach us about God's character? It teaches us that he doesn't need our vindication.

He's not accountable to our human standards of fairness. His plans, his purposes, and his policies are infinitely more complex than we can ever imagine. He created this incredibly wild, dynamic world with a wisdom that is far beyond our grasp.

And ultimately, he invites us to just trust that wisdom. We really have to look at what the author does with the character of God, rather than taking every single action the character takes at face value. As we wrap up this explainer, I want to leave you with this ultimate challenge from the book of Job.

If God's ways cannot be reduced to a simple equation, if we won't always get the clear explanation we so desperately want, can we still learn to trust his infinitely complex wisdom, even when we are sitting in the dark? It's a question that completely transforms how we view justice, suffering, and the breathtaking, irreducible nature of God. Thanks so much for joining me on this deep dive, and keep asking the big questions.