



Wisdom #2

Wisdom in the face of suffering

w/c 2 February 2025

"Wisdom outweighs any wealth." (Sophocles)

To begin, as you think back, how have you responded to loss or suffering – however small (or large) it may have felt compared to Job's?

I thought it would be useful to start with a few basics about the whole book in order to put our thinking into context:

What is it? Job is a book of wisdom writing; a literary form alien to us today but well known in its context. The central poem has often been described as one of the greatest poems of any language, ever.

What is its purpose? Job is essentially a lengthy meditation on the problem of suffering. Of suffering itself and our reaction to it. Its heart though is perhaps less to do with Job's loss and physical pain but more with the anguish he feels as God fails to respond in the way he expects.

When was it written? Commentators vary greatly in their thoughts as to when Job was written. It seems likely that it gained its final form in the fifth or sixth century BC though the story and the memory of Job himself go back far further. The opening lines do though have something of 'Once upon a time' about them. Or, to paraphrase a certain film, "'A long time ago in a land far, far away....'".

Who was Job? Firstly, he was not a Jew. His character was though well known to the Jewish people – see Ezekiel 14:14. He lived in Uz, which was probably to the south-east of Israel, somewhere heading towards Arabia. He was extremely wealthy, but willing to use that wealth to help others – see chapter 29 and particularly verses 11 to 19.

Who wrote/edited it? Various biblical names have been linked with the book, but the author must almost certainly remain unknown. The prose and poetic sections may indeed have had different authors. The latter does not use the covenant form of God's name – YHWH – but rather the more ancient El or derivatives such as El Shaddai. The prologue and epilogue do though use YHWH.

Satan? Verses such as chapter 1 verse 6 are unlikely to refer to Satan as we understand that name. Rather the Hebrew is simply a description – of someone opposed to you. Translations which render it as 'the accuser' may well be more accurate. One writer noted that it could (in this dramatic personae) be seen as one of God's staff who has the duty to make sure people don't get away things – a safeguard against God being too soft.

Read Job 1:13–22 (Though if you have time, it's worth reading the whole chapter to put things in context.)

It is important to see our reading in the context of those earlier verses of chapter one. Job is wealthy, extremely so, and described – even by God himself – as one who is *"blameless and upright"*. He is *"totally devoted to God"* (v8, The Message), yet the accuser poses the question *"Why?"*. Is it because that's how Job is or is it just the result of him having wealth and other blessings? Let's see, he says, what happens if we take it all away – and not just his wealth but his health as well (see chapter 2 verses 1–8). So, Job does lose everything, and yet he *"did not sin in what he said"* (chapter 2 verse 10).

The bulk of the book is now taken up with a series of dialogues between Job and those described as three friends. Their arguments can be summarised quite simply as *"All suffering is caused by sin; you are suffering; therefore, you have sinned. Now be a good chap, repent and confess and trust God to put it right."* Much of what they say is sort of 'right', yet just simply wrong in the context it's given.

Job's response to all that can be equally distilled as: *"I am suffering. I haven't sinned. Therefore, suffering is not simply caused by sin. I can't repent of something I've not done. Now, go away, you're not helping."*

The '*patience of Job*' may well be a common saying but it is rather out of place. As we read his responses, Job comes across as anything but patient – he shouts, he argues, he wants an answer now. It's more a case of perseverance, or as The Message puts it, his *"staying power"*. It's a sign of how the English language has changed since the seventeenth century.

All of that takes some 35 chapters after which Job does get to meet God. That culmination will be the subject of a study later in the series. Let's think through some of the issues raised in that earlier part of the book:

- How do we avoid becoming like Job's friends when talking to someone who has suffered loss? How should we help them?
- In chapter 9 verse 1, Job poses the ultimate question: *"How can a mortal be righteous before God?"* How would you answer him?
- In several places, Job sounds rather angry with God. How do we distinguish that – which we can take to be right – from cursing God which (in the words of Job's wife) leads to death?
- While not discarding its wisdom, how do we avoid any temptation when reading this book of seeing God as rather distant and only occasionally descending to earth?
- In chapter 9 verses 33–35, Job longs for one who could mediate between him and God. What difference does our knowing the actual mediator (see 1 Timothy 2:5 or Hebrews 9:15) make to our understanding of Job?

Having read Job, we can see that that God does not cause suffering; it happens because it happens. It's down to the individual and collective free will of humanity and, so it seems, the equivalent of that across the physical world. God is there though throughout our experience of it and is far more than we can ever imagine. If Job had one fault it was that his idea of God was too small. How do we balance the awe and wonder engendered by God's final response to Job with the later invitation to call him 'daddy' (Romans 8:15) or, in the words of the writer to the Hebrews, knowing that we can *"draw near to God"*?

Have you ever read the whole book of Job? If you have the time, it's worth it. It may be easier to listen using tools such as the Bible Gateway website. If you select the NIV UK translation there, then you'll get to hear David Suchet read it to you.

"God had one son on earth without sin, but never one without suffering." (Augustine of Hippo)