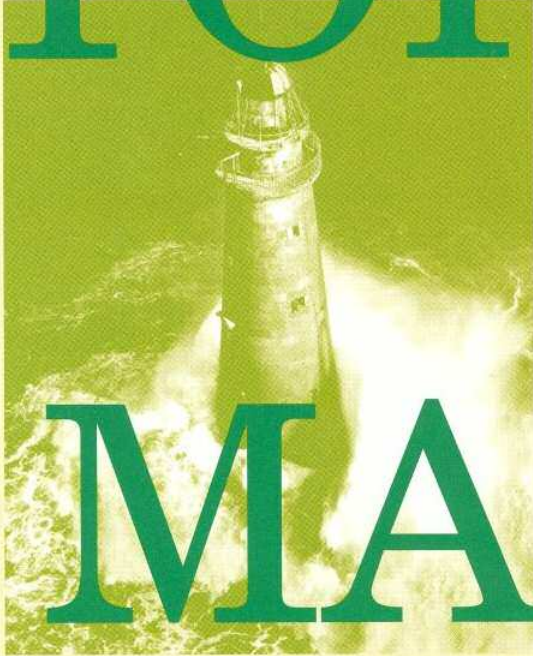


JOB
THE
STORY
OF
A MAN
CONFRONTING
ADVERSITY

A vertical rectangular inset image showing a lighthouse on a rocky island. The lighthouse is a tall, cylindrical structure with a lantern room at the top. The base of the lighthouse is surrounded by turbulent, white-capped waves crashing against the rocks. The sky is a pale, overcast blue.

A Seven-Session Bible Study for Men

by William M. Ramsay

The Story of a Man Confronting Adversity

A Seven-Session Bible Study for Men

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*This book is part of the Men's Bible Study series produced through the
Office for Men's Ministries of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).*

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The Reasons for This Study

*We trust in God the Holy Spirit,
everywhere the giver and renewer of life ...
The same Spirit
who inspired the prophets and apostles
rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture.*

These words from "A Brief Statement of Faith," adopted officially by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 1991, state a primary conviction of Presbyterians. Presbyterians believe that God's Spirit actually speaks to us through the inspired books of the Bible, "the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the church universal, and God's Word" (*Book of Order*, PC(USA), G 14.0516) to each of us.

Recent studies, however, have shown that many men know very little of what the Bible says; yet many do express a desire to learn. To help meet that need, this Bible study guide has been prepared at the request and with the cooperation of the National Council of Presbyterian Men of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and its president, Dr. Youngil Cho. This study of Job is the first in a series, but it may be used quite apart from the others.

The Suggested Pattern of Study

Men may use this guide in a variety of weekly settings: men's breakfasts, lunches in a downtown setting, evening study groups in homes, and many more. The material provides guidance for seven one-hour sessions. To facilitate open discussion it assumes a small group of men, no more than twelve, one or preferably two of whom might be designated as leaders. Each session is a Bible study; there must be a Bible for each man. The Bible, not this study guide, is the textbook.

The men are not required to study outside the group sessions, though suggestions are given for such study. To be enrolled in this study, however, each man is expected to commit himself to make every effort to attend and participate fully in all seven sessions.

The pattern of study is to be open discussion. Agreement by all to follow seven rules will make such study most effective:

1. We will treat no question as stupid. Some men will have more experience in Bible study than others, but each man must feel free to say what he thinks without fear of being ridiculed.

2.

We will stick to the Scripture in this study. The men in the group have gathered for Bible study, not to pool their own ideas on other matters, however good those ideas may be.

3. We will regard the leader(s) as "first among equals." Leaders in these studies are guides for group discussion, not authorities to tell the group what the Bible means. But following their study, suggestions will facilitate learning. The pastor will serve as a resource for leaders in this study but may or may not be a leader, as determined by each study group.

4. We will remember that we are here to hear God speak. Presbyterians believe that the Spirit, which spoke to the biblical writers, now speaks to us through their words. We do not come simply to learn about the Bible, but with minds and hearts expecting to receive a message from God.

5. We will listen for "the question behind the question." Sometimes a man's gestures and tone of voice may tell us more of what he is feeling than his words do. We will listen with sympathy and concern.

6. We will agree to disagree in love. Open discussion is an adventure full of danger. Men will differ. None of us will know the whole truth or be right all the time. We will respect and love and try to learn from each other even when we think the other person is wrong.

7. We will make every effort to attend and participate faithfully in all seven sessions of this study. Participation will involve making notes and answering questions relating to Job and, from time to time, sharing our answers with others, even when we worry that they are not the "right" answers.

Some Suggestions for the Leaders

Those who lead groups in this study should be especially aware of the preceding seven "rules."

Though two leaders are not required, having a team of leaders often helps to open up the group for freer discussion by all its members. One leader might be responsible for introducing the study at a given session and for summarizing other parts of the study where such summaries are suggested. The other leader might take more responsibility for guiding the discussion, helping to see that each man who wishes has a chance to speak, helping to keep the study centered on the Scripture, and moving the group along to the next subject when one has been dealt with sufficiently. Or the leaders might alternate in their responsibilities or share them equally.

This material is a guide for study within the group. The study material for each session is to be distributed at the time of that session. The study guide for each session is in the form of a worksheet. Each man should have a pencil or a pen. Spaces are provided for each student to make brief notes for his answers to questions on the passages to be studied. A good deal of the time may be spent as the men quietly, individually, decide on and note their own answers to these questions. Some are designed simply to guide the students in looking at key passages in Job. Others are intended to help the students think about what these passages mean to us today. The real basis of this study should be the ideas that come in the times when the men are quietly studying their Bibles and deciding individually on their answers to these questions. When a man has made a note on his sheet concerning his answer to a question, he has had to do some thinking about it. And he is more likely to be willing to tell the group his answer.

There should also be time, of course, for the group to share and compare answers to these questions. In the New Testament the Holy Spirit seems most often to be manifest within a group. God speaks to us authoritatively through Scripture, but often what God says to us in Scripture becomes clearest when voiced by a Christian friend. We learn through each other.

Each session ends with an Afterword, often a story of a modern Job.

Among the many characteristics of a good discussion leader are these: (1) He tries to give everyone who wishes a chance to speak, without pressuring anyone to speak who does not want to. (2) He does not monopolize the discussion himself and tries tactfully to prevent anyone else from doing so unduly. (3) He is a good listener, helping those who speak to feel that they have been heard. (4) He helps to keep the group focused on the Scripture. (5) He tries to watch for signs that show that the group is or is not ready to move on to the next question.

This kind of study can generally be carried on much more effectively with the participants sitting informally in a circle rather than in straight rows with the leader up front. Frequently, especially in a large group, you may want to divide into groups of three or four, or simply let each man compare his answers with those of the man sitting next to him.

Often, more questions have been given than some groups are likely to cover in one hour. If you don't answer them all, don't worry. Pick the ones that seem most interesting and let the rest go.

The questions in this study guide are phrased in various ways and come in different orders, but basically they are intended to help the participants think through three things: (1) What does this passage say? (2) What does it mean? (3) What does it mean now to you? It is our conviction as Presbyterians that when believers study God's word together in an atmosphere of prayerful expectancy, God will speak to them.

Throughout each study, the leaders will find Scripture quotations. These quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. While this version is used throughout the study, it may prove beneficial for each participant to use the version with which he feels most comfortable.

Testing has shown that the discussion that arises in each study may cause the session to last longer than the intended sixty minutes. Asterisks (*) are placed beside those sections of each lesson that may be omitted or summarized by the leaders for the sake of time. Discussion is at the heart of these studies and should not be sacrificed for the sake of presenting the lesson as shown in the study guide.

In the letter inviting the writers of these studies to attempt this work, Dr. Marvin Simmers, having recognized some difficulties, added, "Remember, we are not alone!" The leaders also may take courage from that assurance.

INTRODUCTION

The Book of Job

The Book of Job was selected for this introductory study because it seems in certain ways to fit so well the concerns of many men. Thousands of men drop out of church as young adults. Recent surveys indicate that as they rear children and face the tensions and responsibilities of middle age, many of the baby-boom generation are now showing renewed spiritual concern. But reports indicate that such men are not returning to the old, set patterns. Many seem to value the spiritual journey, the questioning, more than simply arriving at the answers of their childhood. Job is the story of a man who rejects the old standard platitudes his friends offer. He never gets a set of fixed answers, but in the end he *does* encounter God.

Nobody knows when Job lived. We are told he lived in Uz, but nobody is sure where Uz is. The most likely guess is that it was in Edom. If so, Job may not have been a Hebrew. We don't know who wrote the book or when it was written. Think of Job as Everyman, belonging to no particular historical age or place, but representative of us all. Job is any man who suffers, questions, and cries out for help and for meaning in his misery. Job is any man who cries out, sometimes with no apparent success, for God. This book is the closest thing to a play in the Bible. It is divinely inspired poetry, not just some dusty ancient history. You are Job.

Some men may feel that historical reports are truer than poetry. Others may argue that poetry often expresses spiritual truth more clearly and movingly than factual history. Some groups may wish to discuss that question. It may be important to emphasize, however, that Presbyterians believe that the truth of Scripture comes from the witness of the Holy Spirit in our hearts as we study it, whether a book is poetry, parable, epistle, or history. Whatever one's view of the literary genre of Job, Presbyterians regard it as part of the inspired Word of God.

Job's wisdom was already legendary by the time of Ezekiel in the sixth century B.C. (Ezek. 14:14). In our book the ancient tale is retold in prose in the first two chapters and the last chapter (Job 1—2 and 42). The first two chapters tell how God, challenged by Satan, demonstrates that some men will remain faithful even when it does not pay. "Would Job continue to serve God if God did not shower Job with blessings?" Satan asks. God accepts the challenge. The action in these two chapters moves back and forth between heaven—pictured as a kind of throne room or court—and earth. In somewhat

stylized fashion, full of repetition that pounds in the message, the author tells us how Job loses all his wealth, his children, and even his health, yet he refuses his wife's proposal that he "[curse] God, and die" (v. 9b). Job has stood the test. He has demonstrated that one can be true to God even when no obvious blessings flow from it. It is probably those first two chapters that cause James to urge us to remember the patience and endurance of Job (James 5:7–11). In the end (Job 42) God restores everything: wealth, health, and family. It may be that in earlier versions of the story this restoration was presented as a kind of reward to Job for his continued faithfulness.

Into this ancient tale, however, a poet has inserted a poem more than thirty-nine chapters long, the heart of the book. It describes how three friends come to comfort Job in his affliction. Each takes a turn at advising Job, and Job replies to each. Then there is another cycle, with each taking another turn and Job replying. They even try a third time. (Zophar's third speech seems now to be lost, but it may be that Job 24:18–20 was originally Zophar's words.) Underlying the friends' "comfort" is their conviction that, because God is just, suffering must be the result of sin. If Job will repent of his sins, all will be well.

Their idea is not unlike one expressed repeatedly in the book of Proverbs. That book of "wisdom literature" promises that:

The righteous are delivered from trouble,
and the wicked get into it instead. (Prov. 11:8)
A generous person will be enriched,
and one who gives water will get water.
(Prov. 11:25)

The author of the book as we have it is sure, however, that a set theology of rewards and punishments is much too simple. Job, he tells us in the first verse, is "blameless and upright," yet he is enduring terrible suffering. Throughout the poem Job protests, rightly, that he is innocent. Angered by his friends' platitudes, Job turns from them. Instead, he begs for a chance to plead his case before God.

Thus, as we move through the book, the issue becomes not so much why God allows suffering as the yearning of a mortal to confront Almighty God. Confident of his innocence, Job demands a right to present his cause in the heavenly court. In Job 19:23–27, the best loved passage in the book, Job seems, at least for a moment, to have hope that even beyond his death, aided by a "Redeemer," he will live to see himself vindicated. But

soon he seems to revert to the more typical Old Testament view of death, *sheol*, a shadowy place of nothingness.

In chapters 32—37 a younger friend, Elihu, unmentioned previously, adds his ideas. Although he condemns the others, what he says seems largely a repetition of their idea that Job is suffering because of his sins and that his *only hope* is to *repent*. Throughout Elihu's speech, the poet lets us hear in the background the rising of a storm.

At the climax of the poem, from that storm God does speak words that may puzzle you. They do not "solve" Job's problem. God does not explain Job's suffering. But God does speak to this mortal man! God proclaims the divine majesty, freedom, and wisdom, far above anything a mortal might challenge. A humbled Job, having now actually encountered God, confesses the arrogance of his demand that God justify God's self.

In the final chapter, written in prose like the first two, God condemns the three friends' words. A chastened Job, no longer making demands for himself, sacrifices for his friends. He has seen God, and Job's demands no longer matter. And now, paradoxically, all his wealth and family are restored.

If the members of your group do not agree on exactly what this book means, they are not alone. It has puzzled and fascinated readers for centuries. Perhaps its function is more to raise questions than to provide answers. The last chapter of this guide points to some New Testament passages that shed light on some of the problems so beautifully discussed in Job.

Job is a very long book, one that modern readers sometimes find tedious. This is partly because it is in the form of ancient Hebrew poetry. Even in the English translation, one can sense something of the rhythm of the poet though in translation meter is lost. Hebrew poets did not rhyme sounds; they rhymed ideas. Hebrews delighted in pairs of lines in which *the same idea was expressed in different words*. Note for example the repetition in each of these two typical couplets, a cry for death by the despairing Job:

"O that I might have my request,
and that God would grant my desire;
that it would please God to crush me,
that he would let loose his hand and cut me off!"
(Job 6:8-9)

Indeed the whole structure of the book is repetitious, with the friends saying much the same thing over and over, but in amazingly different ways.

What comes through clearest in this beautiful poetry, however, are the exalted figures of speech, climaxed in the words of God in Job 38—41. Note, for example, the imagery in these verses:

"Have you commanded the morning since your days began,
and caused the dawn to know its place,
so that it might take hold of the skirts of the earth, and
the wicked be shaken out of it?" (Job 38:12-13)

The following outline is taken from *The Westminster Guide to the Books of the Bible*

Job				
The Poetic Story of an Innocent Sufferer Who at Last Meets God				
“Your maxims are proverbs of ashes. . .but I will defend my ways to his face” (13:12-15)				
<p>Prologue 1-2</p> <p>God tests Job by taking his wealth and family. 1</p> <p>God tests Job again with bodily afflictions, but Job is still faithful. 2</p>	<p>Job and His Friends Debate, 3-31</p> <p>Job laments that he was ever born, 3</p> <p>Each friend speaks in turn, proposing that Job's troubles are due to his sins; in turn, Job replies to each, 4-14</p> <p>This cycle of speeches is repeated two more times; Job longs to present his case to God, 15-17</p> <p>A poem on God as the source of true wisdom, 28</p> <p>Job makes his final defense and plea, 29-31</p>	<p>Elihu Adds His Ideas 31-37</p> <p>In four speeches, Elihu condemns both Job and his friends and emphasizes the majesty of God and the helpful discipline that suffering brings.</p>	<p>God Speaks 38-41</p> <p>God's first speech: God's wisdom designed the universe, 38:1-40:2</p> <p>Job accepts in silence, 40:3-5</p> <p>God's second speech: God's freedom and power are shown in God's creation of monsters, 40:3-41:34</p>	<p>Epilogue, 42</p> <p>Job repents, 42:1-6</p> <p>God approves, Job, but rebukes the friends, 42:7-9</p> <p>God restores everything to Job, 42:10-17</p>

Some Additional Helps

The only materials necessary for leading this study are Bibles for all the group members and this study guide. Here, however, are a few of the many commentaries that may be helpful:

Samuel Terrien, "The Book of Job," in *The Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1954), 3:877n.

J. Gerald Janzen, *Job* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985).

H. H. Rowley, *The Book of Job* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1970).

Balmer H. Kelly, *Job*, Vol. 8 in *The Layman's Bible Commentary Series* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1962).

A delightful little book of poems based on Job is *Journey with Job*, by Thomas John Carlisle (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976).

Archibald MacLeish based his prize-winning play *J.B. on Job*.

Several weeks each summer a beautiful outdoor dramatization of Job is presented nightly in Pikeville, Kentucky.

Several helpful books of other kinds are listed in notes at the end of different sessions of this study guide.

There is a brief summary of Job in *The Westminster Guide to the Books of the Bible*.²

² Ramsay, pp. 142-151.

one

In Plenty and **IN WANT**

Job 1—2

(Note: The leader may wish to review some of the material on the introductory pages of this study booklet before beginning the following study of Job 1-2.)

Introduction

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group)

"Oh, God . . . I'm Really Turning 50!" That "prayer" of the worried-looking cartoon character on the cover of *Newsweek*, Dec. 7, 1992, provided the headline for its feature story. Men, both older and younger than fifty, know some of the frustrations, anxieties, aches, and pains the article in *Newsweek* described, and some joys that its writers did not mention. Growing older has some compensations. But *Newsweek* was right: Life in the '90s can sometimes be miserable for the middle-aged man.

The book of Job is one of the most puzzling in the Bible. But men of every age and in every age can identify with its central character. Job, while symbolizing every man, was a middle-aged man.

Nobody is quite perfect, of course, but for the purposes of the story you have to accept that Job really was as nearly perfect as a man could be. No matter what his friends told him, the troubles that were soon to come upon him were not his fault. They were the result of a kind of "bet" that, the storyteller tells us, Satan made with God. Our author, an artist with words, does not write like a modern historian. Instead, he freely describes scenes alternating between heaven and earth.

On earth Job has achieved what these days we would call "the American dream." He is rich. He has a fine family. He is successful in business. He has an admirable reputation, many friends, and a high place in the community. He has contributed to many charities, and he devoutly worships God.

In heaven, Satan does not quite appear as the cosmic enemy at war with God that we know from the New Testament. Rather, the book of Job pictures Satan as a kind of prosecuting attorney in the heavenly court. And there, in effect, he issues God this challenge: "Of course Job is good. That's because you bribe him. But quit giving him all those blessings, and then see how long he will love you!"

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Read that challenge for yourself (Job 1:6-12), answer these questions, and compare your answers with others in the group:

What do you think: Do people "fear God for nothing"?

Yes? _____ Or no? _____

Why? (Privately you may want to ask yourself "Would you?")

What does it mean to "fear" God?

Believing in Job, somewhat as Job believes in God, God take Satan's dare. Read the calamities that Satan now inflicts on poor Job (Job 1:13-18), and list some of them in your own words as they might happen to somebody today:

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____

Of Men in the 1990s

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group)

① Job was not the last man to experience troubles like those. So do we! Here is one list of Job's afflictions, placed in more contemporary settings. As the list is read, make a check mark by each one that has attacked someone close to you.

Violent Crime (Job 1:15)—The Justice Department reports that 23 percent of American households were victims of violent or property crimes in 1992.

Economic Insecurity, Even Catastrophe (1:16)—"In the secular theology of economic man," Sam Keen writes, "Work has replaced God as the source from whom all blessings flow." But what happens when that foundation crumbles? *Newsweek* reports that "career crashes are the baby boom's version of midlife crisis."² Even the man who still has his job begins to realize that the higher position he expected is going to another man, perhaps of another race, or to a woman, and he sees friends getting those dreaded pink slips. Why praise God in *that* insecure situation?

War (1:17)—Social psychologists say that Vietnam left its scar on an entire generation. That wound is especially in the souls of those who experienced the horror of combat in the jungles of Southeast Asia. But wars have left their mark on all of us.

Loss of Children (1:18-19)—There is no bereaved father reading this who would not give all his fortune to have back a child who has died. Millions of fathers have also lost their children through divorce. And do you not know some father who has "lost" a child, now alienated from him by strange forces he cannot understand?

How would you feel if these things happened to you?

1 Sam Keen, *Fire in the Belly* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), p. 55.

2 *Newsweek*, December 7, 1992, p. 51.

3 *Newsweek*, p. 52.

4 *Newsweek*, p. 52.

Read how Job responded (Job 1:20-22) and try to summarize his response in your own words:

Why do you suppose Job responded in this way?

Two More Devilish Tricks

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group)

One is tempted to laugh at Satan; no matter how hard he works, in the end Satan always loses to God. But Satan has two more tricks to try. He has taken Job's children and Job's property. But now he touches Job himself.

Read about what Satan does in Job 2:7-10. Again make a check mark if either of these has happened to someone you know.

Serious Physical Illness (2:7-8). "When the American Board of Family Practice asked a random sampling of 1,200 Americans when middle-age begins, 41 percent said it was when you worry about having enough money for health-care concerns."³ *Newsweek's* article describes a sinister progression: Men "agonize over balding and back trouble, high blood pressure, low sex drive, decay, decrepitude, and . . . the ultimate D word [death]."⁴

A Wife Who Is No Help (2:9-10). In fact, the only suggestion Mrs. Job seems able to make is that Job curse God and commit suicide. Thirty thousand Americans do commit suicide every year, and many more attempt it.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Read Job 2:9—10 and compare your answers with your study group:

Put in your own words what Job says:

Centuries later, James reminded his readers of the patience and endurance of Job (James 5:7-11). What things seem to you to be implied in Job's two sayings (Job 1:21 and 2:10) that enabled him to "hang in there" in the midst of troubles? How could he have this faithfulness?

Can you describe what has helped someone you know keep going in the midst of deep trouble?

What has helped you?

Afterword

Here is a story a little bit like Job's. Terry Waite, a layman, was a missionary diplomat with the Anglican (Episcopal) Church. In 1987 he was sent to Lebanon to try to rescue the hostages kidnapped by terrorists there. Though promised free access, he himself was kidnapped, tortured, blindfolded, and chained in solitary confinement for five years. Told he was about to be executed, he was allowed to write one letter. He wrote family and friends, "Try not to be too sad. I have done my best and can die with a clear conscience. Also try not to be bitter against my captors. They have suffered much in their lives. I love you all. God bless and goodbye."⁵ He tells us that one thing that kept him sane was that he would take the bread and water his captors fed him, and as he ate and drank he would recite to himself the liturgy of the Communion service. Even in captivity, Christ was there.

Looking Ahead

Next week we will study Job 3—10. If you have time, read those eight chapters. If not, at least try to read Job 8:1—7, Bildad's pollyanna reassurance that everything will soon be all right. And ask yourself this question: Is it really true in the world of men that being good pays?

If you have a friend who is really hurting, try visiting with him. Find out how such suffering feels and what keeps him going.

⁵ Terry Waite, *Taken on Trust* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993), p. 86.

two

When Old ANSWERS FAIL

Job 3—10

Introduction

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group)

Martin Luther wrote that Job is "magnificent and sublime as no other book of Scripture." Perhaps it is also the hardest to understand.

The first two chapters are clear enough—straightforward prose. You remember that in them God accepts Satan's challenge and allows Satan to inflict every kind of undeserved horror upon innocent Job. Satan charges that Job is loyal to God only because God has bribed Job by showering blessings on him. But even when all that wealth is gone, Job still remains faithful.

But now comes the hard part. In a poem—more than thirty-nine chapters long!—our author describes how three friends of Job each take three turns at trying to comfort him. Everything they say *sounds* pious and even biblical. But in the final chapter God angrily says they have got it all wrong (Job 42:7-9). So watch your step as you read these next chapters of Job. You may find yourself agreeing with ideas that our author says provoke the wrath of God! (You may be partly right.)

These comforters got off to a good start—they kept their mouths shut. Shocked to tears when they saw him, for a whole week they simply sat beside Job in silence (2:12-13). A saying taught would-be counselors is, "Don't just do something; stand there!" Job's friends really meant to help, and no doubt by just being there, quietly sitting beside him, they did help.

Now Job speaks. For the whole of the third chapter—twenty-six verses—he says just one thing: "I hurt so much I wish I had never been born!" So many verses to say just one thing may seem boringly repetitious to us, but not if you were a Hebrew who loved poetry. Our poetry rhymes sounds; Israelite poetry rhymes ideas. That is, Hebrew poets loved to repeat an idea but to say it in different words. And so Job damns his birthday in more than twenty-six different ways, yet never uses the same phrases twice. You will see this style of poetry all through Job.

And now our author, still writing that kind of poetry, gives us the words of the first comforter, Eliphaz the Temanite. The fact that God will later condemn what

Eliphaz says should not blind us to the fact that Eliphaz is a kindly soul who really does want to help. Perhaps realizing the negative implications of what he is going to say, he begins gently. "If one ventures a word with you, will you be offended?" (4:2), he says, cautiously. Eliphaz is a mystic. He suggests the New Age type who today meditates on esoteric mysteries, consults astrologers, tries to communicate with the dead, or even tries to recall the past life he imagines he once had. And he believes in something like *karma*, the Hindu doctrine that Fate always brings rewards to the good and punishment to the evil.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Read Eliphaz's account of the hair-raising vision that, he says, enables him to solve Job's problem (Job 4:12-17).

How helpful do you think this kind of experience is likely to be?

"You have instructed many," he reminds Job (4:3). "But now it has come to you, and you are impatient" (4:5). Now, he is saying, you yourself need the sermon you have preached to others when they were in trouble.

What is that sermon? This would-be physician of Job's soul makes at least three points. Put each part in your own words and on a scale of 0 (low) to 3 (high) indicate the extent to which you agree with Eliphaz:

(1) *Diagnosis (4:7-9):*

Can you tell the group about something that really did help you when you were going through a difficult time?

(2) *Prescription (5:8):*

At the end of last week's lesson it was suggested that you visit someone who is hurting. If you or anyone in the study group did do that, this might be a good time to tell about anything that was learned.

Job's Replies & Bildad's 1st Speech

(3) *Prognosis (5:17-19):*

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group)

Job answers first by saying, in effect, "That's easy for you to say. You aren't hurting the way I'm hurting" (6:1-3, paraphrased). Then he demands to know just what sin it is of which Eliphaz thinks Job should repent. "Teach me," he pleads (6:24). "Is there any wrong on my tongue?" (6:30). Job knows he is innocent; he has a right to complain!

How helpful do you think Eliphaz's advice would have been to you had you been in Job's situation?

Bildad, the second friend, now speaks (chapter 8). He is the opposite of a New Age yogi; he is a rigid traditionalist. He goes by the rules handed down from the "good old days." "[Inquire now of bygone generations, and consider what their ancestors have found," he tells Job (8:8-10).

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

A bouncy gospel tune tells us that "us a little talk with Jesus makes it right." But what is a man to do when, like Job, he has prayed time and again and seems to get no answer?

To see what Bildad thinks tradition teaches, answer these questions and, on a scale of 0-3, indicate your agreement with Bildad rather than Job:

Bildad is upset (8:1-3). Why?

According to Bildad, why did Job's children perish (8:4)?

According to Bildad, what will solve all Job's problems (8:5-7)?

Note Job's concession in 9:1-2 when he replies to Bildad:

But see how Job really rejects Bildad's easy solution (9:21-24):

A popular tabloid's TV commercials advertise that it is for "inquiring minds." How much more is this true of the Book of Job! It takes faith and courage to seek answers to the difficult questions of life. With the help of God and other Christians, every man is encouraged to face reality in his quest for understanding, yet he must accept solace in the fact that not everything is understandable; the ways of God are not the ways of humanity.

We will find that in the end of the book, God says that what Job's friends have said is not true. The good do not always prosper, and the evil do not always suffer. Yet Job concedes that there is truth in their advice. So where does that leave us?

Here are three possibilities. Stop reading for a while to consider your answer. Mark the one you think nearest the truth, and compare your answers with others in the study group:

Job's friends are right: Since God is good, God will always reward virtue and punish evil (8:6). (Compare Prov. 12:21; 13:21.)

Job is right: God often seems completely indifferent to human suffering (9:22-23).

There is truth on both sides: The friends are right in these ways:

But Job is right in these ways:

Do try to answer. But if you have trouble agreeing on an answer, join the club! If you are bewildered trying to love and understand a God who allows so much suffering in the world, join the club!

And pray that there will be some help given as we go on through this study in the coming weeks.

Afterword

One of that group who has suffered bewilderment is the late C. S. Lewis. His book *The Problem of Pain*¹ is one of the finest discussions of why a loving God lets good people suffer. But when the pain of suffering the loss of his beloved wife hit Lewis himself years after writing his good answers, he was as crushed and bewildered as the rest of us. He confesses that he cried out for his beloved "with mad, midnight endearments and entreaties spoken into the empty air."² *Shadowlands*, a moving film about C. S. Lewis and his grief at the death of his wife, exists both in a version made for British television and another for the big screen.

The author of Ps. 22 expresses our human frustration and bewilderment in feeling abandoned by God. In the temple, the priest would speak these words as a sacrifice was offered to God by one seeking comfort, forgiveness, and a new relationship with the all-powerful God of creation.

¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1962).

² C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: Bantam Books, 1976), p. 29.

Even as Jesus revealed himself as both the priest and the lamb of God on the cross (Mark 15:34), he too spoke the words "My God, my God, why?"

If you find no easy answer to human misery, you are in good company. Jesus has been there too. But the cross is not the end of the story.

Looking Ahead

Next week's study will include the best-loved passage in this long book, Job 19:25-27. If you don't have time for anything else, try to read and think about those verses. It was one of the passages Handel set to music in his *Messiah*. If it is available, listen to that part of the *Messiah* and bring the recording with you to the study group next week. If you have time for more, note that our study will look at some of the other high points in Job 11-27. And you might again visit someone who is hurting.

three

My Redeemer LIVES

Job 11--19

Introduction

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group)

If you have ever begun to think of yourself as middle-aged, what triggered that realization? Here are a few things that, some years ago, startled the writer of this study guide. Check any that you have noticed in your own experience.

- I discovered to my horror that I could not read the fine print on a certain road map.
- I caught a glimpse of the back of my balding head in a mirror.
- My teenaged son began excluding his parents. He would lock himself in his bedroom to make sure we did not bother him.

(The Leader might ask the group to compare their own experiences of becoming aware of growing older.)

Much more sobering for me, however, was a telephone call early one morning. During the night, a friend who worked for the same corporation as I had died from a heart attack. True, he was a little bit older and a little bit more overweight than I, but he was definitely a contemporary of mine. And later there was that truly frightening time when I thought that I myself might have a cancer.

One mark of middle age is that you begin counting your birthdays not so much in terms of how many years you have lived but how many you have left. Perhaps no one is a really mature man until he has faced frankly the fact that someday he will die.

Job is, among other things, the story of a man who has a horrifying encounter. He comes face to face with his own death.

That confrontation comes about in several ways. The first chapter of Job tells us that Job's children were killed. The second chapter tells us that Job was horribly afflicted with some skin disease. Now, as we move toward the middle of the book, Job's debate with his friends about the apparent injustice of God brings the question of death to the fore. You will remember that Job's friends have begun gently as they try to help this man in trouble. Since God is just and Job is good, they reassure him, that everything will soon be all right. The flip side of that reasoning, of

course, is that Job's suffering shows that he must not be nearly as good as he claims to be. Realizing what his friends are implying, Job becomes angry—so angry that he accuses his friends of lying. And he charges that God, far from being just, must be cruel!

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

What seems to show the cruelty, or at least indifference, of God is the fact that death comes equally to all. Read how Job says this (Job 9:22-23), and compare with others in the group your answers to these questions: *What do you think: Is it true that God "destroys both the blameless and the wicked"?*

What does Job think this seems to imply about God?

In what ways do you agree or disagree with this outburst of Job?

Poor Zophar, the third friend, is utterly shocked. A kind of fighting dogmatist, he regards Job as a blasphemer for saying such a thing. Read Job 11:1-6 for his horrified response. Compare your answers to these questions with others in your group.

What does he think of Job's words?

Who does he want to be the one to straighten out Job?

What does he think Job's words imply about Job?

Zophar's reaction to Job's questioning the justice of God raises an important question for all of us: Is it a sin to question God?

We are told that we are saved by "faith," but what does "faith" mean? Here are two definitions. What truth can you find in each?

• Faith means trusting without any questioning, never doubting whatever you are supposed to believe, like a little child; or

• Faith means having the God-given courage to question everything, like a man. Perhaps Job's faith, in the midst of doubts, is this second kind.

There is much truth in the first definition, which Zophar would probably prefer. It leads to his proposal for solving Job's problem. Read it in Job 11:13-16. How helpful would those words be to a good man dying with cancer?

O For An Umpire!!

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group)

"No doubt you are the people, and wisdom will die with you," Job snarls sarcastically. "But I have understanding as well as you.... Who does not know such things as these?" (12:2-3). Disgusted with his friends' stock answers, Job turns from these "comforters." He calls them "worthless physicians" who "whitewash with lies." Instead, he cries, "I would speak to the Almighty, and I desire to argue my case with God" (13:2-3).

But how can a mortal man argue with the immortal God? The apparent hopelessness of death and the apparent hopelessness of ever getting to God become bound together in the middle chapters of this book. Job longs for an "umpire" (9:33) who could mediate between Job and God. "He will kill me; I have no hope; but I will defend my ways to his face," he cries (13:15). And like an accused man who resolves to serve as his own defense council he pleads to God, "Listen carefully to my words,

and let my declaration be in your ears. I have indeed prepared my case; I know that I shall be vindicated" (13:17–18). But only death, it seems, lies ahead (14:1–2).

One thing, of course, could make all the difference. "If mortals die, will they live again? All the days of my service I would wait until my release should come. You would call, and I would answer you" (14:14–15). Christians know that at Easter, Christ "abolished death and brought life and immortality to light" (2 Tim. 1:10). But Job is an Old Testament man. His expectation is *sheol*, the shadowy grave, the "pit," nothingness, as described in Job 14:18-22.

And yet, at least for a moment, Job breaks out of his hopelessness. Somehow there must be that "umpire." There must be a "witness in heaven" on behalf of Job (16:19). And even beyond death there must be vindication. And so we come to the best-loved passage in all this book, where at least for a moment of faith, all these ideas come together.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Read Job 19:23–27 and compare your ideas about these words with others in your group.

What words do you suppose he wants "inscribed in a book" or "engraved on a rock forever" (19:23 24)?

Why would that matter?

A "redeemer," a goel, in the Old Testament is often one's next of kin who marries his kinsman's widow and protects her property, caring for her. Boaz, Ruth's deceased husband's cousin in the book of Ruth, is the perfect example. He rescues widowed Ruth and her mother-in-law. Also, repeatedly in the Old Testament God is called "Redeemer." Which would you guess Job means: God, or a next-of-kin human?

Why do you answer as you do?

Hebrew scholars say that this passage is very difficult to translate, and thus its meaning is not clear. Look at the footnotes in your Bible for possible variations in the translation. What differences would they make?

Repeatedly Job has seen death as the hopeless end, and confronting God as impossible for a mere mortal. Later in the book he will at times slump back into that discouragement. But try now to put into your own words the faith that, at least for a moment, he sings in 19:25-26.

Read 1 Timothy 2:5-6. What difference would it have made if Job had known about Jesus?

What difference does knowing Jesus make for you?

Afterword

Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilych* is the story of a modern Job. Outwardly successful, climbing in business and in society, he discovers that he has cancer. Suddenly his business and position no longer matter. Family and friends try cheerily to pretend that he will soon be all right, but they try to avoid him because they don't want to be reminded of death. As he lies dying, he seems to get some relief from pain when Gerasim holds up Ivan's legs. While doing so, Gerasim talks with him. The reader knows that holding up Ivan's legs is not what helps. What is helping is one honest human being willing to spend time with him and even to touch him. Job's friends and we ourselves might learn from Gerasim.

The classic interpretation of Job 19:25—26 is a beloved aria in Handel's *Messiah*. Listen to the aria if you get a chance. Also the artist William Blake's series of illustrations of Job may be found in many libraries.

Looking Ahead

Next week we will focus our attention on Job 20—31. Read it if you can, but if you have time for only one chapter, study Job 31. As you do so, ask yourself this question: What does it mean to be a real man?

four

Introduction

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group)

Hollywood and television have given us models showing us their view of what it means to be a real man. Thirty years ago it was John Wayne, with two fists and a six-shooter, rescuing cattle and beautiful women from the rustlers. More recently it has been Sylvester Stallone as Rambo, rescuing POWs as he mows down Vietnamese people with an assault weapon. Television commercials teach us how to achieve our goals by torturing ourselves on exercise machines, grooming ourselves with Just For Men and similar products, and wearing the jeans and shoes that are for real men only. The sign that one has achieved the goal seems to be that beautiful women throw themselves at this "real man."

The leader might ask the group to suggest some characteristics of a "real man" as presented by Hollywood and television.

In the book of Job, the Bible presents quite a different picture of what it means to be a man. Throughout the first half of the book, Job has defended himself as a man of integrity, even though he is now sick and poverty-stricken. At the end of the debate between Job and his three "comforters," our author turns aside, somewhat, from the problem of how a good God can allow bad things to happen to good people. Several chapters of the book focus more directly on just what it means to be a man of God.

Psychologists write of the "developmental tasks" of adulthood. High on their list is this: learning to value wisdom above physical prowess. The teenager may swallow the Hollywood version of the real man; the mature Christian is wise enough to choose a different model. Job implies that one thing manhood means is being *wiser* than an adolescent.

Job 28 seems like an interruption to the story of Job's struggle with God in suffering. It is a long, beautiful poem on wisdom. The scholars tell us that it is quite possible the author is quoting a poem that originally existed outside the book of Job.

Wisdom, however, has been a major theme of the book. The words "wisdom" and "wise" have occurred fifteen times in the first twenty-seven chapters, and they will be used a dozen more times in the chapters that follow. The scholars classify Job, like Proverbs, as "wisdom literature." Job's friends have been giving Job "wise" advice, drawn, they are sure, from the accumulated wisdom of the past. They have argued that the wise man can see for himself that it pays to be good and that suffering is the result of sin. Life fits into a system that is rational and neat, and any man who will take a little time to look can make that wise discovery for himself.

And so Job voices a poem about wisdom.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Read that poem in Job 28 and compare your answers to these questions:

How hard is it to get wisdom?

How valuable is it?

Where is genuine wisdom to be found?

Both Job and his friends value wisdom. What difference, if any, do you see in their understanding of wisdom?

What does Job 28 imply about the importance of education?

What kind of education is most important for your children to get?

For you to Get?

A Role Model Man

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group)

So what is a wise man like? Charles Barkley has publicly protested that he is a professional basketball player, not a role model. Most of us, however, envy and sometimes imitate sports figures. The biblical picture of genuine manhood—the truly wise man, whether voiced by Job or his friends—focuses on the moral rather than the physical. In chapter 22, Eliphaz lists the crimes of an evil man and accuses Job of doing every one of them. Job's final speech (chapter 31) is to deny that he has committed those sins. Both chapters summarize the Old Testament's picture of what it means to be a real man. We will study chapter 31.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Read chapter 31. List at least four things that Job regards as signs of a really mature and wise man, and beside each, try to phrase it in modern terms:

- (1) _____
- (2) _____
- (3) _____
- (4) _____

What would you add to Job's list? Compare your answers with those of others.

Here is one list—based on Job 31—of a few of the things that make a real man. Can you add a comment or example for any of these?

(a) Honesty (31:5)—A recent survey among the nation's top high school students, those with a B average or better, found that nearly 80 percent admitted to some cheating.¹ By contrast, a Christian businessman recently gave up a higher paying position for a lower paying job. "There were too many shady deals going on where I was working," he explained. "I wanted no part of that." Job was determined to be honest.

(b) Sexual Morality (31:1, 9–12)—Contrary to the impression given us by Hollywood, television, and surveys like the famous Kinsey report, a recent and more thorough survey indicates that adultery is *not* the rule in American marriages. Actually, in 1993, ninety-four percent of married people were faithful to their spouses.² It's good old monogamy that's really sexy, *Time* concludes. Nevertheless, half the marriages in this country end in divorce. Job protests his faithfulness.

(c) Fairness Toward Employees (31:13–15)—Note the word *minister* in the middle of the words "business administration." Jesus said that "whoever wishes to be first among you [chief executive officer?] must be slave [minister or servant] of all" (Mark 10:44).

(d) Concern for People in Need (31:16–23)—Fifteen percent of Americans, nearly 40 million people, live below the poverty line. Many who discuss "welfare reform" sound like Job's comforters, arguing that poverty is the

result of sin. But Job affirms that his concern has been to help fatherless children, widows, and other poor. He says no word of blame for the victims of poverty and injustice.

(e) A Right Sense of Priorities (31:24–29)—He has not made greed his religion nor gold his god, nor has he been guilty of any other form of idolatry.

(f) A Right Relationship with Other People (31:29–37)—He has respected his competitors (31:29–31). He has shown hospitality to strangers (31:32). (The question of the attitude Christians should take toward aliens is much debated in the United States today.) And he has never hypocritically tried to deceive the public (31:33–34).

(g) Respect for the Earth (31:38–40)—Perhaps even if it might have cut down on his profits, he has been concerned for ecology. And no tenant of Job's nor supplier he deals with can make a legitimate complaint that he has been unfair.

Job has given his portrait of what it means to be a real man. And so, with this last speech of his, Job signs his signature (31:35).

¹ From a survey by *Who's Who Among American High School Students*, as reported by the Associated Press in the *Jackson Sun*, Oct. 20, 1993.

² *Time*, Oct. 17, 1994, p. 70.

Afterword

Hollywood's Rambo rescued prisoners, leaving a trail of dead enemies behind him. Terry Waite, missionary diplomat, went to Lebanon to negotiate the release of hostages and was himself taken hostage and kept in solitary confinement. Early in his captivity, however, he discovered one morning that one of his guards had carelessly left a pistol in the bathroom. Here was his chance to escape! But he quickly put that thought behind him. He had come to save lives, not to kill. He faced enemies with courage, but Waite's kind of courage is different from Rambo's.

Waite knows a model of manhood different from the popular one. Do you want to see what it means to be a real man? Pilate, showing Jesus to the crowd of angry, shouting men and women, cried, "Here is the man!" (John 19:5).

Looking Ahead

Next week's study surveys chapters 32-37, in which are contained the words of a fourth friend, young Elihu. Elihu suddenly appears and tries to straighten out both Job and Job's friends. Read those chapters, or, if you haven't time for more, try at least to read Job 33:12-28.

For a moving autobiography of a modern Job, read *Taken on Trust*, the autobiography of Terry Waite, chronicling especially his five years as a prisoner in Lebanon (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993).

Introduction

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group)

At times, one source of vexation for older people is younger people. The World War II generation finds "baby boomers" getting the jobs, power, and raises they once had, or perhaps even much better rewards than they ever had. And who has not experienced the irritation of hearing a younger person talk as though he knew more than his elders?

Elihu seems to be one of those annoying young persons. He is so "full of words" (32:18) that he spends a whole chapter (Job 32) and a little bit of the next chapter just announcing that he is going to speak. He is sure that, though young, he is wiser than these older men (32:9-10). Indeed, he describes himself as "perfect in knowledge" (36:4). Some scholars have suggested that Elihu's function in the poem is, at first, to provide a bit of comic relief before the Lord speaks mighty words.

Elihu is not mentioned at the beginning of the story nor at the end, but only in these chapters. He really does not add a great deal. And his words could be left out and one would never guess that something was missing. Nevertheless, the current trend among scholars is to accept his six-chapter speech as an integral part of the poem.

Looking at young Elihu's speech gives us a good chance to review a part of the problem that the book of Job discusses.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Elihu's speech includes at least four ideas. All these have been said in Job before, but his words give us a chance to review these human ideas before turning to what God says in the closing chapters of the book. Here are four of Elihu's major points:

1. Elihu shares a basic belief expressed repeatedly by Job's other friends. Horrified by Job's apparently accusing God of injustice, he expresses part of his theology in Job 34:6-11.

Put in your own words this basic idea of Elihu's:

What do you think of this idea?

It is true

or

It is false

or

It is true in that

But it is false in that

2. A second, more hopeful, major idea of Elihu's is summarized in 33:23-30. In your own words, Elihu is saying:

Does this sound to you like the gospel in the New Testament?

Yes? _____ Or no? _____

Why do you suppose it does not satisfy Job?

3. Repeatedly Elihu suggests another reason God, though good, allows people to suffer. What purpose in suffering seems suggested by 33:12—18? (Compare 36:10, 22.)

Again, does it seem to you that this idea of Elihu's is

true, or _____

false, or _____

true in this way, _____

but false in this way _____

4. Finally, Elihu develops even further and idea of the three comforters. When Elihu has finished, God will speak from a whirlwind (38:1). According to Elihu, what does the power of God in nature imply about human questioning of the Almighty? (37:14—20).

Four Contemporary Parallels

(The leader might read these and after each ask for comments)

1. Elihu and the three comforters have proposed that suffering is caused by sin. "[According to their deeds he will repay them" (34:11). C. S. Lewis by no means agrees that *all* suffering is caused by our sin or that people who suffer the most are necessarily the worst people. Nevertheless, Lewis writes:

When souls become wicked they will certainly . . . hurt one another; and this, perhaps, accounts for four-fifths of the sufferings of men. It is men, not God, who have produced racks, whips, prisons, slavery, guns, bayonets, and bombs; it is by human avarice or human stupidity, not by the churlishness of nature, that we have poverty and overwork¹

Job's suffering was not Job's fault, but can you tell the group about some suffering you have endured that really was your fault? What was the difference between you and Job?

2. Elihu writes that the man who turns to God soon sings of God's grace, "He has redeemed my soul from going down to the Pit [of death]" (33:28). It would be utterly false to suppose that the Bible teaches that faith always heals. Nevertheless, the daily paper recently reported:

In a study of 232 elderly patients who had undergone open heart surgery, those who were able to find strength and comfort in their religious outlook had a survival rate three times higher than those who found no balm in religious faith.²

Our merciful God does so often directly answer prayer. Can you tell the group about a time when a gracious God Delivered you from some "pit

3. Elihu argues that God "opens [the sufferers'] ears to instruction" (36:10). "Who is a teacher like him?" he exclaims (36:22). Many centuries after Elihu, another poet wrote:

I walked a mile with Sorrow,
And ne'er a word said she;
But, oh, the things I learned from her
When Sorrow walked with me!³

*Some lessons are learned only "the hard way." Can you tell about something God taught you through suffering?*¹

1. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1962), p. 89.

2 From The New York Times News Service, as printed in the Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, Feb. 7, 1995.

3 Robert Hamilton, "Pleasure and Sorrow," *Masterpieces of Religious Verse*, James Dalton Morrison, ed. (Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1948).

4. Elihu marvels at the wisdom of the Creator, so far beyond us that we must bow before God in reverent awe, not demand answers. "God thunders wondrously with his voice; he does great things that we cannot comprehend" (37:5). "[Around God is awesome majesty. The Almighty—we cannot find him" (37:22-23). Scientist A. Cressy Morrison reminds us of the mystery of life itself as but one of many signs of the wisdom of the great Designer:

The resourcefulness of life to accomplish its purpose is a manifestation of all-pervading Intelligence... . Behold an almost invisible drop of protoplasm, transparent, jellylike, capable of motion, drawing energy from the sun. This single cell, this transparent mistlike droplet, holds within itself the germ of life, and has the power to distribute this life to every living thing, great and small. The powers of this droplet are greater than our vegetation and animals and people, for all life came from it. Nature did not create life; fire-blistered rocks and a saltless sea could not meet the necessary requirements. Who, then, has put it here?⁴

To a scientist such as Morrison, such marvels of nature point us beyond our own concerns to the awesome wisdom of the Creator.

What marvel of creation particularly reminds you of the infinite intelligence of God? Have we a right to question the Creator's plans?

Afterword

Philosopher John Hick wrestles with the problem of how a good God can allow so much suffering in the world. Admitting that there is no easy answer, he nevertheless finds some help in thinking of what suffering does for our souls:

Christianity . . . has never supposed that God's purpose in the creation of the world was to construct a paradise whose inhabitants would experience a maximum of pleasure and a minimum of pain. The world is seen, instead, as a place of "soul-making" in which free beings, grappling with the tasks and challenges of their existence in a common environment, may become "children of God" and "heirs of eternal life." . . . This world . . . [though] not designed for the maximization of human pleasure and the minimization of human pain, may be rather well adapted to the quite different purpose of "soul-making."⁵

Looking Ahead

Job has spoken. God's three friends have spoken. Elihu has spoken. But now, at last, God speaks. For next time, study chapters 38—41, or, for at least a taste of what the Almighty says to Job, read 38:1-18.

For further study, the following books and articles may be of help:

- C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1962).
- The New York Times News Service, as printed in the Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, Feb. 7, 1995.
- Robert Browning Hamilton, "Pleasure and Sorrow," in *Masterpieces of Religious Verse*, James Dalton Morrison, ed. (Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1948).
- A. Cressy Morrison, *"Man Does Not Stand Alone"* (Fleming H. Revell Co., 1944).
- John Hick, "The Problem of Evil," in *Philosophy and Contemporary Issues*, 5th ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), pp. 140-145.

4 A. Cressy Morrison, "Seven Reasons Why a Scientist Believes in God," in *Philosophy and Contemporary Issues*, 5th ed., John R. Burr and Milton Goldinger, eds. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), p. 99.

5 John Hick, "The Problem of Evil," in *Philosophy and Contemporary Issues* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), pp. 144-45.

Six

God SPEAKS

Job 38:1—42:6

Introduction

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group)

We have come at last to the climax of our study: God, God's self, speaks.

God did appear and speak in the first two chapters, though only in heaven. Challenged by Satan, God used Job to demonstrate that there are people who will remain true to the Lord even when faithfulness seems not to pay. Job loses all his former blessings: riches, family, and health. But he replies patiently, "[The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21).

For the next thirty-five chapters, however, human beings, not God, do the talking. The three friends talk, Elihu talks, and Job talks, but God says not a word. To Job, as sometimes to us, God seems hidden (Job 13:24).

Job's friends begin with gentle suggestions and move soon to angry denunciations, but from start to finish they have at least three basic ideas: (1) Job's suffering shows that he is a sinner; (2) If Job will repent, all will be well; (3) He is blaspheming dangerously in proposing that Almighty God would deal with anyone unjustly. Job, however, has been equally insistent (1) that he is innocent of any sin that could cause his suffering, (2) that God has treated him with gross injustice, and (3) that he demands a chance to stand before God and plead his case.

In chapters 38–41, at long last, Job does meet God. God speaks. God has the last word! What God says is the subject of this session of study.

What seems to be the chief subject about which God questions Job?

What do these questions imply about God?

What do these questions imply about Job?

What sort of answers do these questions suggest?

To summarize, see if you can put in one or two sentences what seem to be the one or two main points God is making with God's long list of questions, and compare your summary with others in the group.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

"I will question you," God announces to Job, who has been questioning God for thirty-five chapters. And surely God does question Job! Just glance through Job 38 and count the questions God asks in that one chapter.

Now, more carefully, read Job 38:1–18 and answer these questions:

Remember that God is speaking to Job out of a whirlwind (38:1). What kind of things, if any, can we learn about God from tornados?

Elsewhere in Scripture the Lord also speaks through God's rescue of God's people from Egypt, through inspired prophets, and especially through Jesus Christ. If Job had heard God speak in one of these other ways, what other kinds of things do you think Job might have heard God say?

When and how has God spoken most clearly to you?

Power and Wisdom of the Creator

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group)

One thing God points out to Job is how far above us is the awesome power and infinite wisdom of the Creator. "Can you . . . can you . . . can you . . .?" Over and over God hurls that question at Job (38:31—39). Can Job control the stars (38:31)? Of course not! Job is overwhelmed by the thought of God's majesty. Philosopher Immanuel Kant was very much a rationalist. But "the starry heavens above and the moral law within," he confessed, "fill me with awe."

Job, too, was filled with awe. But think how much more he might have been humbled had he lived today, when we know so much more of the grandeur of the heavens. If Job had traveled all around the world, east and west and north and south, and carefully counted all the stars, he might have seen 6,000. But how many do we now know about? There are some hundred billion suns in

our galaxy alone. It takes light 100,000 years to travel from one edge of that galaxy to the other. But our Milky Way is only one galaxy. There are some 10,000 million other galaxies more or less the same size as ours. Think how full of awe Job would have been had he known the power of God as we now can know it!

In Job 40:6—41:34 God delivers another speech, also in exalted poetry. "Look at Behemoth" (the hippopotamus), God challenges Job (40:15). Do you want to try catching one of those with a hook or even with a trap? Or try fishing for a crocodile, God challenges Job again (chapter 41). But this crocodile God describes is no ordinary crocodile. It is a poetic figure for the chaos, the "formless void" (Gen. 1:2) that, in creation, only God could conquer. But God can play with even this monster as if it were a bird or put on a leash as if it were a pet (41:5). God is free to do whatever God chooses even with such a beast—and Job must learn, with any human. Neither cosmic monsters nor traditional rules about justice nor Job's human reason can limit Almighty God.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

How would you have responded if God had spoken to you as God did to Job? Compare your answer with others in the group.

Read Job 40:1-5, Job's answer to God's first speech. How would you summarize Job's response?

How have you responded when God has spoken to you?

Job 42:1–6 gives Job's response to God's second speech. (Note that 42:3 is quoting the Lord's words in 38:2 and that 42:4 is quoting 40:7.) We will come back to this response next week, but read it now and compare with others your answers to these questions:

How would you summarize that response?

Since we have been assured that Job is not suffering because of any sins he has committed, of what do you suppose he is repenting (42:6)?

For forty-one chapters we have been waiting for God's answer to Job's problem. What answer, if any, to his concerns has Job now received?

Perhaps what has made the difference for Job is what he describes in 42:5. What difference is there between hearing about God and actually hearing God speak to you?

Afterword

Reynolds Price was a fifty-one-year-old professor at Duke University. An avowed Christian, a tenured professor, and a popular and critically acclaimed novelist, he appeared to be successful and secure in every way. Then one day there came the grim news that he had an eight-inch malignant tumor within his spine. No operation could fully remove it. Privately the physicians agreed that he could not have more than eighteen months to live. Steadily the paralysis petrified his legs. The pain grew until it was utterly devastating, and yet grew and grew all the more.

Price describes months of sickening treatments, agonies of physical therapy, and help he received from biofeedback and hypnosis that enabled him in some sense to ignore the ever-mounting pain. But he also describes hours of Bible study with a friend and daily prayer even when there seemed to be no response. The most unusual experience of this modern Job was a vision of Christ. There, at what seemed to be the Sea of Galilee, Jesus summoned him. They waded out into the water.

Jesus silently took up handfuls of water and poured them over my head and back till water ran down my puckered scar. Then he spoke once—"Your sins are forgiven"—and turned to shore again, done with me.

I came on behind him, thinking in standard greedy fashion, It's not my sins I'm worried about. So to Jesus' receding back, I had the gall to say, "Am I also cured?"

He turned to face me, no sign of a smile, and finally said two words—"That too." Then he climbed from the water, not looking around, really done with me.

I followed him out and then, with no palpable seam in the texture of time or place, I was home again in my wide bed.¹

Price was never physically healed. Though his cancer eventually yielded to treatments, he will be in a wheelchair the rest of his life, fighting to ignore excruciating pain. But perhaps in that vision he received what really matters. He had met Christ. He calls the story of his Job-like experiences *A Whole New Life*.

Looking Ahead

Our last session on Job is next week. Read the last chapter of Job. To the extent that you can, think about and bring to class your own list of the best things you have learned from your study of this puzzling but fascinating book.

¹ Reynolds Price, *A Whole New Life* (New York: Atheneum, 1994), p. 43.

seven

CONCLUSION

Job 42

Introduction

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group)

We have come to the end of this study. Job has faced almost every problem a man can face, most of those calamities agonizingly multiplied. He has lost wealth, family, and health. The stock comforts of popular religion offered him by his friends have been no comfort at all.

But now something quite different has happened—Job has heard words from God! For chapter after chapter Job has demanded a chance to present his cause before God. But when, at last, God speaks, Job is reduced to silence. For chapter after chapter we have wanted some explanation of why a loving God can allow so many bad things to happen to good people. God says nothing to answer our question. Instead, God has hurled some forty questions of God's own at Job, rhetorical questions that simply point to the superiority of God to mortals. God has challenged Job to match the Creator's design in nature. God has reminded Job of the Lord's transcendent freedom, freedom even to play with bizarre monsters.

Job has received no answer. Yet Job asks no more questions. Job makes no more demands. Job announces, "I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (42:6). Puzzling! Job is overwhelmed by the mystery of Almighty God. Job is reduced to repentance for what apparently now seems to him arrogance in the demands he has made on the Lord of the Universe. But do note carefully this fact: God can create storms and play with sea monsters, but God *speaks* to human beings like Job.

What has Job come to know about God (42:1-2)?

What, if anything, have you learned about God through this study of Job?

What has Job come to know about himself (42:3-4)?

What has this study suggested to you about yourself?

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Read Job's response to God's words as found in Job 42:1-6, answer these questions, and compare your answers with others in the group.

What brought Job deeper insight (42:5)?

When, and how, has deeper insight come to you in these seven sessions?



The Epilogue

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group)

Suddenly, with 42:7, the poetry ends. We are back in the traditional prose narrative of the first two chapters of the book. The poem ends with Job's repenting, but as the prose begins it is the three friends who need to repent (42:7—8). Job, who had yearned for a mediator between himself and God, now himself becomes a mediator. He offers sacrifices on behalf of those friends (42:9). Now, when Job prays for his friends, God, who had for so long seemed deaf to Job's cries, hears Job's prayer (42:9).

And finally, the story over, everything is put back in its place. All is restored double to Job (42:10). His brothers and sisters give him both sympathy and funds (42:11). He accumulates enormous wealth (42:12). His wife presents him seven sons and three beautiful daughters (42:13—15). His children, in turn, present him grandchildren and great-grandchildren (42:16). And apparently with his health restored, he lives, if not "happily ever after," at least for a long, long time (42:17).

There are two ways of thinking about this ending:

(1) The happy ending ruins the story. It makes it seem that the friends were right after all: God does inevitably reward goodness and trouble never lasts long for a really righteous man. That over-simple idea of divine justice is exactly what the rest of the book, the long poem, is trying to deny. The author has, here, simply preserved a traditional prose tale, originally told for a purpose quite different from that of the poem he composed.

(2) The God of Job is not bound by any rules. God can freely choose now to visit Job with grace if God wishes. Note the grace of Job, who offers sacrifices on behalf of the friends who have so insultingly accused him of heinous sin. An ending focused on grace is a proper completion of any story about God.

Which of these two views do you think is nearer to the truth?

THE NEW TESTAMENT AND JOB

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

For seven weeks our study has focused largely on Job, a book of the Old Testament. The Old Testament is an inspired collection of books with a message and integrity of its own. Nevertheless, Christians read the Old Testament in the light of the New. So reflect for a while and then enter below the best answers you can give to this question. (Compare your answers with others.)

What new light do you think the New Testament sheds on the questions with which Job and his friends struggled? See if you can suggest at least two relevant New Testament ideas:

(1)

(2)

Here are some passages in the New Testament that some have felt were helpful in dealing with Job's problem. (Note: the leader might ask one member of the group to read one of these and let the group comment. Then another of the group might read another for comments.) What, if anything, does each suggest about Job, or what help might it offer to those facing Job-like suffering? (Some have been cited earlier in our study.)

(1) James 5:7—11 _____

(2) Mark 15:33–34 _____

(3) 1 Timothy 2:5–6 _____

(4) 1 Corinthians 13:12–13 _____

(5) 2 Corinthians 4:16—5:1 _____

(6) Revelation 21:1–5 _____

"THE FINAL EXAM"

For Individual Thought and Group Discussion

Please take some time to consider thoughtfully each of these four review questions. Note your answer to each in the space provided. And if you will and if it is not too private a matter, share your answers with others in the group.

(1) What would you say is the main point—or what are the two or three main points—that you believe the writer of this book wanted to make?

(2) What, if anything, has God said to you through this study? What has it meant to you personally?

(4) _____

(3) What, if anything, do you particularly feel you yourself ought to do, growing out of this study?

(4) What do you feel you should pray for, growing out of this study?

(5) Finally, what, if anything, would you like to suggest that the group pray for now as the study ends?

Afterword

Darrell Smith was a business man. At fifty-three he was secure in his career. In the fall he proudly watched one of his sons playing football. He looked forward to attending his daughter's wedding the next summer. He was enjoying a long and happy marriage. He was respected and liked by all, and especially beloved by those who worked under him in his office. He was an elder in his church.

Suddenly came the dreadful word that he had brain cancer. After his four months of agony, we gathered in a packed church for Darrell's funeral. We sang joyful hymns and the choir sang a joyful anthem. But as we remembered this good man, this modern, middle-aged Job, the minister wept, and so did many, many more. Why would God let Darrell die? Together we prayed this prayer, which the church bulletin ascribed to Thomas Merton:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore, I will trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me; and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.¹

¹ Reprinted from *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master*, by Lawrence S. Cunningham. ©1992 by Lawrence S. Cunningham. Used by permission of Paulist Press.

What People Are Saying About the Men's Bible Study Series

William M. Ramsay is Professor Emeritus and Adjunct Professor of Religion at Bethel College in McKenzie, Tennessee, where he was the Hannibal Seagle Professor of Philosophy and Religion from 1979—92. He studied at Rhodes College and Union Theological Seminary, and received his Ph.D. from the University of Edinburgh in Scotland.

Among his publications are *The Layman's Guide to the New Testament* and *The Westminster Guide to the Books of the Bible*, along with numerous church school curriculum materials. He was also a columnist for *Presbyterian Outlook* for seventeen years.

Ramsay is married to DeVere Maxwell Ramsay, an author and adjunct professor of Christian education. They have two sons and four grandsons.

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