

# Is your God too small?

David C. Potter



**Is your God  
too small?**

## **The Bible Reading Fellowship**

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David C. Potter



To Madeleine

We have walked a long way together.  
With you and through you I have learnt so much of grace and love,  
of faith and perseverance,  
and of beauty.

## Foreword

It was a kind gift to a young student of theology: *Your God Is Too Small* by J.B. Phillips, published in 1957. Somehow, I never got around to reading it. The book remained on my shelves for decades, still unread, until at some stage it was lent or lost, given or sold. Yet there are few books that have had a more long-term influence on my spiritual and theological development. The title remained with me as a constant challenge to my faith, doubts and fears. 'Your God is too small' was the phrase that came to mind when, after years of evasion, I finally got around to studying the book of Job.

'Have you considered my servant Job?' was God's question to Satan. It could well be God's challenge to us too. Some books of the Bible seem just too obscure, too long and too demanding for the pace of life in the 21st century. The book of Job is one of them. It is a story so different that we ignore it rather than struggle with its rhetoric. For years, that was what I had done and only now do I realise how much I have been missing that could have helped me through the unavoidable struggles and challenges of living as a Christian in the modern era.

For some years, I have found the IVP series, 'The Bible Speaks Today', very helpful in my daily Bible readings. Using *The Message of Job* by David Atkinson from the series, I steadily worked my way through the book with a growing sense of excitement and wonder. When I reached the end, I started again, this time also using the Tyndale Commentary on Job by Francis Andersen and referring occasionally to other, but less helpful, commentaries I have.

## How to use this book

The place to start is with the book of Job itself. Take time to read it through. Use a modern translation; the New International Version is as good as you will find. This will give you a feel for the book. Don't worry at this stage if you find it hard to follow. It will also be helpful to read the relevant Bible passage as you come to the section which considers it.

Next, read the Introduction which follows (starting on p. 9). It provides some background to the book of Job. The meat of this book is divided into sections following the content of Job. You will find that each section covers a number of chapters of Job, which are introduced to help you understand their content better. You will find some issues are dealt with separately by way of additional information, some are developed in a more devotional style and, at the end of each section, there are questions to help you 'earth' what you have read. Why not open a journal and write your response to these questions?

Be sure to ask for the help of the Holy Spirit as you read. After all, he inspired the writer of the book of Job so is well placed to inspire you through it!

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## Introduction

Why? It was probably the first question we ever asked and we may well be asking it still as our lives come to an end. The young child is overwhelmed with discovery and demands urgent explanations for the world that fills its small horizons. The car starts – why? The sun, as we say, ‘goes in’ – why? Steam rises from the kettle spout – why? On and on, the questions are endless. Or it comes in response to a command: ‘Don’t step into the road!’ – why? ‘Don’t run!’ – why? Or, a few years later but with a different tone of voice, ‘Don’t stay out late tonight!’ – why not? ‘Don’t answer back!’ – why not?

But when we reach adulthood, the question assumes a darker shading. We want answers to bigger mysteries that stalk the path of every thinking person, and the greatest mystery seems to be human suffering. We need to understand. We pound the door of heaven for explanations which will address the seeming injustices of pain and tragedy, each bitter tear a question mark. Many give this as their reason for refusing to believe in God. It is not that their atheism is so strong but that their ‘faith’ is so weak.

We believe we can find the answers to these dilemmas with our technology and scientific knowledge. Surely, in our day more than any before, such basic questions must yield their mysteries. What really did happen on Bloody Sunday? Why did 96 football supporters die that day at Hillsborough? What really was said and done by whom, and when, in the debacle we call ‘the Iraq war’? These are but a few of the enquiries lasting years and costing millions where every crumb of evidence was examined to answer the same haunting question: why? And when the millions of words are read, the tears shed, the fingers pointed, the experts have spoken and the reports

are gathering dust on the shelf, we discover that they have addressed the wrong question. All they can tell us is the 'how?' or the 'who?' or the 'what?'; but not the 'why?'

When the serpent tempted Eve with the promise, 'You will be as gods,' he offered the possibility of an explanation of all things, but he lied. We still look for the same power: the wisdom to understand – ourselves, our world, our God and his ways. We want to know.

The poem of Job reflects this struggle to understand God's way in the world and to find our place in the greater scheme of things. And it does so at the point where the struggle is most intense: in the place of suffering. As Job eventually emerges from the struggle once more to flourish, he still hasn't found 'the answer', nor has the reader, but both are given a new way of responding to God.

The book does not set out to answer the problem of suffering, but to proclaim a God so great that no answer is needed.

H.L. Ellison<sup>1</sup>

We may regard it as one of the most original works in the poetry of mankind.

R.H. Pfeiffer<sup>2</sup>

Those who have written more fully on the book of Job express astonishment at the wide range of issues to which it makes reference, the breadth of human experience from despair to moral outrage to the loneliness of one who feels abandoned by God. Its poetic beauty is unrivalled and at times stunning.

Job's is not a fast-moving story, told in short chapters with neat sound bites. The book moves forward slowly, argumentatively and, at times, mysteriously towards its climax. If, however, we can grasp its message, we will have a much more profound understanding of how God works in the world and of a wisdom that is infinitely superior to our own.

The book of Job fascinates scholars because it keeps so many secrets:

- 1 Who was Job? We want to know more about this man but, no matter how much we prise up the edges and corners of his story, we fall back on little more than guesswork. Job is almost unmentioned in the rest of the Bible or contemporary literature, even though his patience has become a proverb in itself. Although there is no external historical reference to Job the man, we can feel, as we read, that this is a real-life story we are reading. For anyone who has known deep suffering, Job's raw pain, his utter bewilderment, will have the ring of truth.

It might be easier to answer questions of Job's identity if we could place him on the timeline of Old Testament history, but there are no references to contemporary events we can date. The fact that Job acts as a priest for his family suggests that he lived before Moses and the introduction of the Levitical priesthood, while linguistic clues place him closer to the exile, hundreds of years later.

- 2 Who wrote Job? We don't know; nor do we know how the book came to be written, and to be written in such a developed literary style. Clearly it wasn't Job; never once does he speak as the storyteller.
- 3 How is Job written? It is largely written as poetry, and Hebrew poetry at that. (See below for a brief explanation of Hebrew poetry.) Don't look for rhyming couplets! The poetry is very carefully constructed according to the literary norms of biblical poetry where 'rhythm' is in the repetition of ideas rather than sounds. This slows the pace of the discussion and may lend a slightly unreal quality to the exchanges.

Translating the book of Job presents a challenge to scholars because so much of the language is obscure. It uses over 100

words otherwise unknown in any of the languages of the ancient Near East. So, if you find variation between versions of the book, do not be surprised; sometimes the translators have to make their best guess.

All such discussions are external to the book itself. The book of Job is unique, both within the Bible and also among the literature of the ancient Near East.<sup>3</sup> It 'is an astonishing mixture of almost every kind of literature to be found in the Old Testament. Many individual pieces can be isolated and identified as proverbs, riddles, hymns, laments, curses, lyrical nature poems.'<sup>4</sup> In its story and its telling, the voice of God will be heard, the chasm between human and divine wisdom will be seen, the limitations of our own perception will be drawn and the awe-inspiring wonder of God's grace in human experience will be revealed to a greater degree.

The outline of the book follows a form which shows great care on the part of the author. Our approach follows a simpler framework:

- Chapters 1–2: Prose prologue which sets the context of what follows
- Chapter 3–27: The discussion between Job and his friends
- Chapter 28: An interlude on wisdom
- Three monologues:
  - Chapters 29–31 by Job
  - Chapters 32–37 by Elihu
  - Chapters 38–41 by God
- Chapter 42: Job restored

Another way of reading Job is to see it as basically three approaches to suffering (with a prologue, an interlude and an epilogue):

- Looking back (3–27)
- Looking forward (29–37)
- Looking up (38–41)

Still another approach, using the same divisions (with a prologue, an interlude and an epilogue):

- Focus on suffering: its cause
- Focus on the sufferer: the purpose
- Focus on sovereignty: the solution

The book of Job is a rich mine which yields treasure found in few other places in scripture.

### **Wisdom literature**

The book of Job is classed as belonging to the ‘wisdom literature’ of the Bible.

Every age had its ‘wise men’ who reflected upon their life and times. In the ancient Near East, notably in Egypt and Mesopotamia, rulers gained prestige and political power as much for their wisdom as for their military might. A professional class developed to serve this need, men whose role was to reflect on the meaning and purpose of existence, the deeper issues of humanity’s relationship to God. They became a sort of ‘think tank’ for the pharaohs and kings of the ancient world, the ‘special advisors’ of those in power.

They wrote an abundance of literature recording the poems, legends and myths of the culture and religion of past civilisations. This literary genre finds its examples in the story of the Jews, some of it in the Old Testament in the books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Some scholars would also include the Song of Solomon.

# 1

## Prologue: chapters 1—2

**Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.**

JOB 1:8

**Start here: read chapters 1 and 2**

- Job introduced
- Satan's challenge and Job's first test: note Job's response
- Satan's second challenge and Job's second test: note Job's response

The opening chapters introduce us to Job and set the story in a recognisably human context. They supply all the biographical detail about Job that is available to us. He lived in 'the land of Uz', which may have been in territory to the east of Jordan that became part of Edom, so not part of Israel. Job may not, then, have been an Israelite. He was known and respected beyond his own country for his wealth, his integrity and his faith. Job was a prosperous family man – all the numbers being suggestive of the ideal family and business (1:2–3).

The brief glimpse we are given of family life shows love and harmony between its members (1:4). Like the patriarchs, Job took spiritual responsibility for his family by acting as priest within the household, offering sacrifices against the possibility that his children had offended God during their partying (1:5).

So far, so good. This is what we might expect: the good and godly man is blessed with prosperity. Deuteronomy 28 predicts this and

Psalm 1 expects it – often, so do we. Indeed, some build a theology on this presupposition.

From this gentle, pastoral opening scene, we move into a sort of ‘bifocal’ view of Job’s life: in one view, we see the disasters which fell upon him from the perspective of the man and his family, friends and employees; in the other view, we are taken behind the scenes, as it were, to see from the perspective of God and the spiritual realm. Here, a bigger picture is revealed than Job and his friends are ever able to see.

Having introduced us to the main character, the story moves from earth to wherever is meant by ‘the presence of the Lord’ (2:7; see also 1:6), which some take to be heaven. The location is, however, incidental; what matters is the occasion itself. A ‘holy convocation’ is in process at which ‘angels’, also described as ‘sons of God’ (literally ‘the hosts’), present themselves before God. We are not told anything about the purpose of the occasion or whether it was a frequent gathering or something unusual. All we know is that in this instance, apparently exceptionally, Satan was also present, fulfilling his function as ‘the adversary’ – which is what his name means.

There follows an exchange between God and Satan – which, in itself, raises unanswerable questions. But it is made very clear that Satan is not God’s equal in any way! God initiates the conversation. God points to the example of Job, giving the most remarkable testimonial imaginable, and then repeating it. This was an exceptional man: ‘There is no one on earth like him’ (1:8; 2:3). Satan, who is only ever responding to what God says, wants nothing more than to bring Job down. He knows that he cannot lay a finger on Job without God’s permission. Satan completely misunderstands and misrepresents Job’s goodness: he attributes Job’s righteousness to self-interest. Take away his ‘stuff’ and, alleges Satan, Job will curse God. The implied wager is accepted by God in that he will allow Satan power to act against Job so long as the man himself is unharmed (1:12).

On a single day, when Job's children are together feasting, a series of disasters strikes Job's family. A messenger rushes into Job's office with news that two crucial herds – the oxen which did the ploughing and the donkeys which carried the produce – have been stolen by rustlers who then killed the herdsmen as well. There is no time to react before another messenger bursts in to report that a freak natural disaster has killed the whole of his vast flock of sheep and their shepherds. Still reeling from this news, Job's response is interrupted by the arrival of another distraught employee telling him that foreigners have stolen his 3,000-strong herd of camels and killed their keepers. With his business in tatters, Job has one more messenger who will give him the worst news yet: all his children have died under the sudden collapse of the building where they were partying.

Critically, the focus is now on Job: how will he respond? His agri-business is in ruins; many of his employees have been murdered; worst of all, the sons, who had probably worked with him in the family firm, were dead and his beautiful daughters too. Will Satan's prediction be fulfilled? Grief-stricken, Job falls to the ground – in worship! Such is his faith that he accepts the overwhelming pain and trusts in God's inscrutable wisdom. In the midst of his anguish, he recognises the goodness of God. To paraphrase: 'It was the Lord who gave; it was the Lord who removed; and in the Lord alone must the explanation of these strange happenings be sought.'<sup>5</sup> Yet this very faith does not relieve the pain; rather, it intensifies it.



### For reflection: Job 1:21

Naked I came from my mother's womb,  
and naked I shall depart.

The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away;  
may the name of the Lord be praised.

JOB 1:21

Job's reaction to the devastating losses he suffered speaks powerfully to us in an age when we have so much stuff. There are times when Job seems so New Testament – which, given that both were inspired by the same Spirit, is not really surprising. Compare his comments on loss with remarks by Paul and James.

Naked I came from my mother's womb,  
and naked I shall depart.

JOB 1:21

For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing  
out of it.

1 TIMOTHY 6:7

Of course, we know this: it is obvious. Every baby ever born came into the world with nothing but their amazingly compact self, humanity in so small and vulnerable a package. Before long, at least in developed countries, the power to acquire things shows itself, even if it is only by a process of point, scream and then suck. Soon the toy cupboard will be full and still the same method is employed, modified a little: point and pout. We go through life wanting, getting, scheming, collecting as we fill our homes and our hearts with more and more things.

'How much did he leave?' a relative asks the executor. 'Everything' is always the answer. It is a sobering thought and we do well to learn from Job. But how was he able to stand aside from his wealth in this way? He never lost sight of its source.

The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away;  
may the name of the Lord be praised.

JOB 1:21

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.

JAMES 1:17

All Job's prosperity was given to him. Of course, he had worked hard for it. He had a shrewd business brain, no doubt, and the help of his sons, but without God's giving there would have been no receiving. What an example to us this is.



Job passes the first test, demonstrating that God's assessment of him was correct: his trust in God was the expression of genuine love. Satan appears not in the least embarrassed by his exposure as a liar when he next appears in God's presence. He continues to argue that Job's faith is motivated solely by self-interest and that if God were to permit Satan to touch Job physically – in his body – then the man would certainly show that his faith was a sham. Satan makes a disturbingly realistic, though cynical, assessment of our priorities: 'A man will give all he has for his own life' (2:4). So, once again, in order to demonstrate that a person may love God for his own sake, God gives permission for Satan to do what he chooses so long as Job's life is spared (2:6).

The focus returns to the human level: Job's body becomes drenched in pain from a terrible skin condition. He retreats to the place for society's untouchables in deep humiliation and anguish. Although the physical impact is dreadful, the spiritual effect is far greater. Job believes in a just God who rewards righteousness and punishes sin. How, then, could this be happening to him when he has been meticulous in his personal holiness and religious practice?

Suffering is, of course, a problem to the sufferer, but its ripples touch other lives too, especially family and friends. Job's wife is also grief-stricken at the losses they have suffered and now she sees her only remaining strength and support devastated by a terrible and repugnant illness. Her outburst – 'Are you still maintaining your integrity? Curse God and die!' (2:9) – bespeaks her desperation: why not end it all by cursing God and being blasted by divine judgement? For Job, it is another layer to his agony, but he bows his

head in acceptance of what God sends, and what a challenge is in that submission: 'Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?' (2:10). It is a statement that could be the theme for the rest of the book. 'In all this, Job did not sin in what he said' (2:10; see also 1:22).

Bad news travels far and fast. Perhaps living far from Job, his friends hear of his plight and come together to visit him. Their attitudes and actions in making this response are movingly sensitive and supportive. What they find is far worse than they had imagined. Overcome with horror, grief and anger, they join him in the place of his humiliation. For seven days, they sit with him among the ashes of the community rubbish heap, silently sharing Job's anguish. We will note their failings in due course but at this point we can have nothing but praise for their deep empathy for their friend. When faced with tragedy and horror in the lives of friends, we feel completely inadequate to offer words of comfort and hope. For this reason, many remain at an embarrassed distance. Never underestimate the power of presence, even when it is wordless. An arm of support, shared tears, sighs and silent prayers do more to reach across the loneliness of pain to offer comfort than speeches that are barely audible to the sufferer.

Suffering is a universal human experience. Few, if any, pass through life without being touched by its tentacles in one way or another. We all find, sooner or later, that 'shadows fall on brightest hours, that thorns remain'.<sup>6</sup> Yet we, like Job, are surprised, perhaps angry, when it happens to us. Libraries could be filled with the books written about experiences of suffering or explanations or 'how to cope' manuals. Fortunes have been made by those offering solutions. The book of Job is neither a 'cure-all' nor about coping. It offers us three different responses to suffering which are as real and as relevant today as when it was first written.

The scene is now set against which the drama of the poem will be acted out across the chapters and the responses explored. The speakers will wrestle with this most profound of human challenges.

They will try to explain a cosmic drama in entirely terrestrial terms. Job understands that what is happening is the result of God's 'hidden hand', and that is what causes him such pain. He, like us, looks in vain for an explanation in his past; Job, and we, must learn that suffering may say more about the future than the past.

## For you to consider

Paul encourages us to make an honest assessment of ourselves:

Think of yourself with sober judgement, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.

ROMANS 12:3

- God's assessment of Job was unequivocal: this was an exceptionally good man! What sort of statement might God be able to make about you? We are not expected to condemn ourselves but to acknowledge both our strengths and our weaknesses, our achievements and our failings. So, what about you?
- Consider where you are most vulnerable to temptation and failure in your Christian life. What can you do to forestall an attack by Satan?
- At first, the three friends visited Job but had nothing to say. What would you have done in that situation? Is there anyone you know who needs your presence at the moment?