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# Job and Work

Theology of Work Project

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## Job and Work

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### Introduction to Job

The book of Job explores the relationship between prosperity, adversity and faith in God. Do we have faith that God is the source of all good things? Then what does it mean if the good things disappear from our lives? Do we abandon our faith in God or in his goodness? Or do we take it a sign that God is punishing us? How can we remain faithful to God in times of suffering? What hope can we have for the future?

These questions arise in every sphere of life. But they have a special connection to work because one of the main reasons we work is to achieve some level of prosperity. We work — among many other reasons — to get a roof over our heads, put food on our tables, and to provide good things for ourselves and the people we love. Adversity may threaten whatever prosperity we have found, and faith is difficult to maintain in times of economic adversity. The chief character in the book of Job begins in prosperity and experiences nearly unimaginable adversity, including the loss of his livelihood and wealth. Over the course of the book, his faith is severely tested as he experiences both dazzling success and crushing defeat in his work and life.

We will explore the book's many workplace applications to work. Is economic success a sign of our abilities or of God's blessing? What does job loss or failure tell us about God's assessment of our work? How can faith in God help us handle failures and losses? How do stresses in the workplace affect our family lives and our health? What can believers do to support one another in workplace adversities? How can we handle feelings of anger at God if he allows us to suffer unjust treatment at work? We will delve into Job's practical treatise on relationships between superiors and subordinates, founded on the equal respect due each person created by the one and only God. Finally, we will consider the remarkable contribution Job makes to the economic rights of women.

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### Background and Outline (Job)

The author of Job is anonymous. Job does not seem to be an Israelite, because he is said to be from the

land of Uz (Job 1:1), which most scholars suggest was to the southeast of ancient Israel. Because he is cited in the book of Ezekiel (Ezek. 14:14, 20), it seems best to date his story no later than Ezekiel's life (6<sup>th</sup> Century BC). His story, in any case, is timeless.

The book contains a wide variety of literary genres (narrative, poetry, visions, dialogue and others) woven together into a literary masterpiece. The most commonly accepted outline identifies two cycles of lament, dialogue, and revelation, sandwiched between a prologue and an epilogue:

Job 1-2	Prologue - Job's Prosperity Lost
Job 3	Job's First Lament
Job 4-27	Dialogue with the Three Friends
Job 28	Wisdom Revealed
Job 29-31	Job's Second Lament
Job 32-37	Dialogue with Elihu
Job 38-42:6	God Revealed
Job 42:7-17	Epilogue - Job's Prosperity Restored

## Theology and Themes (Job)

Most familiar to Bible readers as the righteous man who suffered unjustly, Job exemplifies the person who questions why good people suffer. Job's faith in God is put to the extreme test, and the story intimates that Job's commitment to God wanes. As we will see, Job's woes begin at work, and the book gives us valuable insights into how a follower of God may faithfully function within the ups and downs of work life.

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## Prologue (Job 1-2)

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### Job's Prosperity Acknowledged as God's Blessing (Job 1:1-12)

At the beginning of the Book of Job we are introduced to an exceptionally prosperous farmer/rancher named Job. He is described as “the greatest man among all the people of the East” (Job 1:3). Like the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, his wealth was measured by his many thousand head of livestock, numerous servants and large family. His seven sons and three daughters (Job 1:2) are both a personal joy to him and an important foundation of his wealth. In agricultural societies, children supply the most reliable part of the labor needed in a household. They are the best hope for a comfortable retirement, the only pension plan available in the Ancient Near East, as is in many parts of the world today.

Job regards his success to be the result of God's blessing. We are told that God has “blessed the work of Job's hands, and his possessions have increased in the land” (Job 1:10). Job's recognition that he owes everything to God's blessing is highlighted by an unusual detail. He worries that his children might inadvertently offend God. Although Job takes care to remain “blameless and upright” (Job 1:1), he worries that his children may not be so fastidious. What if one of them, addled by too much drink during their frequent days-long feasts, should sin by cursing God (Job 1:4)? Therefore, after every feast, to forestall any offense to God, “Job would send and sanctify them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all” (Job 1:5).

God recognizes Job's faithfulness. He remarks to his Satan (a Hebrew word meaning simply “accuser” [1]), “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil” (Job 1:8). The accuser spots an opening for mischief and replies, “Does Job fear God for nothing?” (Job 1:9). That is, does Job love God only because God has blessed him so richly? Is Job's praise and his burnt offerings “according to the number of them all” just a calculated scheme to keep the goods flowing? Or to use a modern image, is Job's faithfulness nothing more than a coin fed into the vending machine of God's blessing?

We could apply this question to ourselves. Do we relate to God primarily so that he will bless us with the stuff we want? Or worse yet, so that he won't jinx the success we seem to be achieving on our own? In good times, this may not be a burning issue. We believe in God. We acknowledge him — at least theoretically — as the source of all good things. At the same time, we work diligently, so God's goodness and our work go hand in hand. When times are good, and we do in fact prosper, it is natural to thank God and praise him for it.

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## God Allows Satan to Destroy Job's Prosperity (Job 1:13-22)

The problem of pain comes when times are hard. When we are passed over for promotion or lose a job, when we become chronically ill, when we lose people we love, what then? We face the question, "If God was blessing me during the good times, is he punishing me now?" This is a hugely important question. If God is punishing us, we need to change our ways so he will stop. But if our difficulties are not a punishment from God, then changing our ways would be foolish. It might even oppose what God wants us to do.

Imagine the case of a teacher who gets laid off during a school budget cut and thinks, "This is God's punishment because I didn't become a missionary." Taking her layoff as a sign, she enrolls in seminary and borrows money to pay for it. Three years later, she graduates and begins trying to raise support for her mission. If indeed God caused the layoff to punish her for not becoming a missionary, she has ceased the offense. She should be in good shape.

But what if her layoff was not a punishment from God? What if God actually has no intention for her to become a missionary? While in seminary, she may miss an opportunity to serve God as a teacher. Worse yet, what happens if she fails to raise support as a missionary? She will have no job and tens of thousands of dollars of debt. Will she then feel abandoned by God if her mission plan doesn't work out? Might she even lose her faith or become bitter towards God? If so, she would not be the first. Yet it would all be because she mistakenly assumed that her layoff was a sign of God's punishment. The question of whether adversity is a sign of God's disfavor is no light matter.

The accuser — Satan — hopes to set just such a trap for Job. Satan says to God that if he removes the blessings he has so richly bestowed on Job, "He will curse you to your face" (Job 1:11; 2:4). If Satan can get Job to believe he is being punished by God, Job may be caught in either of two snares. He may abandon his righteous habits in the mistaken assumption that they are offensive to God. Or, better yet from the accuser's point of view, he will become bitter at God for his undeserved punishment, and abandon God altogether. Either way, it will be a curse in the face of God.

God allows Satan to proceed. We are not told why. One harrowing day, nearly everything Job treasures is stolen and the people he loves — including all his children — are murdered or killed in violent storms (Job 1:13-16). But Job neither assumes God is punishing him nor becomes bitter over God's treatment. Instead he worships God (Job 1:20). At his lowest moment, Job blesses God's authority over all the circumstances of life, good or bad. "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21).

Job's finely balanced attitude is remarkable. He rightly understands his previous prosperity as a blessing from God. He does not imagine he ever *deserved* God's blessing, even though he recognizes he

was righteous (implicit in Job 1:1,5 and stated explicitly in Job 6:24-30, et al.). Because he knows he didn't deserve his former blessings, he knows he does not necessarily deserve his current sufferings. He does not take his condition to be a measurement of God's favor. Consequently, he doesn't pretend to know why God blessed him with prosperity at one time and not at another.

Job is a rebuke to the so-called "prosperity gospel," which claims that those in right relationship with God are always blessed with prosperity. This is simply not true, and Job is Exhibit Number- One. Yet Job is also a rebuke to the "poverty gospel" which claims the opposite, that a right relationship with God implies a life of poverty. The idea that believers should *intentionally* emulate Job's loss is too far-fetched to appear even on the fringe of discussion in Job. God might call us to give up everything, if doing so were necessary under the circumstances to serve or follow him. But the book of Job makes no suggestion that God inherently desires anyone to live in poverty. Job's original prosperity was a genuine blessing of God, and his extreme poverty is a genuine calamity.

Job can remain faithful under adversity because he understands prosperity accurately. Because he has experienced prosperity as a blessing from God, he is prepared to suffer adversity without jumping to conclusions. He knows what he doesn't know, namely why God blesses us with prosperity or allows us to suffer adversity. And he knows what he does know, namely that God is faithful, even while God allows us to experience great pain and suffering. As a result, "In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong-doing" (Job 1:22).

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## God Allows Satan to Destroy Job's Health (Job 2:1-11)

Job is able to endure overwhelming loss without compromising his "integrity" or blamelessness<sup>[2]</sup>(Job 2:3). But Satan does not give up. Perhaps Job merely hasn't faced *enough* pain and suffering. Satan now accuses him of serving God only because he still has his health (Job 2:4). So God allows the accuser to afflict Job with every matter of loathsome sores "from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head" (Job 2:7). This is especially galling to Job's wife, and she asks him, "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die" (Job 2:9). She accepts that Job is blameless in God's eyes, but unlike him, doesn't see the point in being blameless if it doesn't bring God's blessings. Job responds with one of the classic verses of scripture, "Shall we receive the good from the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" (Job 2:10).

Once again we find Job ascribing every circumstance of life to God. Meanwhile, Job is unaware of the heavenly activity that is behind his situation. He cannot see inner workings of heaven, and it is only the integrity of his faith that prevents him from cursing God. How about us? Do we recognize that like Job, we do not understand the mysteries of heaven that shape our prosperity and adversity? Do we prepare for adversity by practicing faithfulness and thanksgiving during good times? Job's unwavering habit of

prayer and sacrifice may have seemed quaint or even obsessive when we encountered it in Job 1:5. But now we can see that a lifetime of faithful practices forged his capacity to remain faithful in extreme circumstances. Faith in God may come in an instant. Integrity is formed over a lifetime.

Job's adversity arises in his workplace, with the loss of his means of income. It spreads to his family and eventually attacks his health. This pattern is familiar to us. We can easily become so self-identified with our work that workplace setbacks spread to our family and personal lives. Workplace failures threaten our self-identity and even our integrity. This, plus the practical strain of losing income and security, may severely disrupt family relationships. Though they seldom cause violent death, work-related stresses may lead to a permanent destruction of families. Eventually we may experience debilitating physical and mental health issues. We may be unable to find peace, rest or even a good night's sleep (Job 3:26). In the midst of this, Job maintains his integrity. It might be tempting to draw a moral such as, "Don't get so wrapped up in your work that its problems affect your family or your health." But that wouldn't do justice to the depth of Job's story. Job problems *did* affect his family and his health, in addition to his work. Job's wisdom is not about how to minimize adversity by maintaining wise boundaries, but about what it looks like to maintain faithfulness through the worst circumstances of life.

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### Job's Friends Arrive to Comfort Him (Job 2:11-13)

With Satan having done his worst, Job could really use some support. Job's three friends enter the story and are depicted as sensitive, pious and sympathetic men. They go so far as to sit with Job for seven days and nights (Job 2:13). They are wise enough — at this point — not to say anything. Comfort comes from the friends' presence in adversity, not from anything they might say to make things better. Nothing they can say *could* make things better.

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### Job's First Lament (Job 3)

There is nothing left for Job but to lament. He refuses to incriminate himself falsely, and he refuses to blame or abandon God. But he does not hesitate to express his anguish in the strongest terms. "Let the day perish in which I was born, and the night that said, 'A man-child is conceived'" (Job 3:3). "Why did I not die at birth, come forth from the womb and expire?" (Job 3:11). "Or why was I not buried like a stillborn child, like an infant that never sees the light?" (Job 3:16). "Why is light given to one who cannot see the way, whom God has fenced in?" (Job 3:23). Notice that Job's lament is almost entirely in the form of questions. The cause of his suffering is a mystery. Indeed, it may be the greatest mystery of faith. Why does God allow people he loves to suffer? Job does not know the answer, so the most honest thing he can do is ask questions.

## Job's Friends Blame Job for the Calamity (Job 4-23)

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### Job's Friends Accuse Him of Doing Evil (Job 4-23)

Regrettably, Job's friends are not able to endure the mystery of his suffering, so they jump to conclusions about its source. The first of the three, Eliphaz, acknowledges that Job has been a source of strength to others (Job 4:3-4). But then he turns and puts the blame for Job's suffering squarely on Job himself. "Think now," he says, "who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off? As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same" (Job 4:7-8). Job's second friend, Bildad, says much the same. "See, God will not reject a blameless person nor take the hand of evildoers" (Job 8:20). The third friend, Zophar, repeats the refrain. "If iniquity is in your hand, put it far away, do not let wickedness reside in your tents. Surely then you will lift up your face without blemish; you will be secure, and will not fear...Your life will be brighter than the noonday" (Job 11:14-15, 17).

Their reasoning is a syllogism. God sends calamities upon wicked people only. You have suffered a calamity. Therefore you must be wicked. Job himself avoids this false syllogism. But it is very commonly accepted by Christians. It is called a theology of divine retribution, and it assumes that God blesses those who are faithful to him and punishes those who sin. It is not entirely without biblical support. There are many cases in which God sends calamity as a punishment, as for example he did at Sodom (Genesis 19:1-29). Often, our experiences do bear out this theological position. In most situations, things turn out better when we follow God's ways than when we forsake them. However, God does not *always* work that way. Jesus himself pointed out that disaster is not necessarily a sign of God's judgment (Luke 13:4). In Job's case, we know the theology of divine retribution is not true because God says that Job is a righteous man (Job 1:8, 2:3). Job's friends' devastating error is to apply a generalization to Job's situation, without knowing what they're talking about.

Anyone who has spent time with a suffering friend knows how hard it is to remain present without trying to give answers. It is excruciating to suffer silently with a friend who must rebuild life piece by piece, without any certainty about the outcome. Our instinct is to investigate what went wrong and identify a solution. Then we imagine we can help our friend eliminate the cause and get back to normal as soon as possible. Knowing the cause, we will at least know how to avoid the same fate ourselves. We would rather give a reason for the suffering — be it right, be it wrong — than to accept the mystery at the heart of suffering.

Job's friends succumb to this temptation. It would be foolish to imagine that we would never do the same. How much harm have well-intentioned Christians caused by giving pious-sounding answers to suffering, even though we have no idea what we're talking about? "It's all for the best." "It's part of God's plan." "God never sends people more adversity than they can handle." How arrogant to imagine



we know God's plan. How foolish to think we know the reason for anyone else's suffering. We don't even know the reason for our own suffering. It would be more truthful — and far more helpful — to admit, "I don't know why this happened to you. No one should have to go through this." If we can do this, *and then remain present*, we may become an agent of God's compassion.

Job's friends can't lament with Job or even acknowledge that they lack a basis for judging him. They are hell-bent (literally, given Satan's role) on defending God by placing the blame on Job. As the friends' speeches continue, their rhetoric becomes increasingly hostile. Faced with the self-imposed choice of blaming Job or blaming God, they harden their hearts against their former friend. "There is no end to your iniquities," says Eliphaz (Job 22:5), and then he invents some iniquities to charge against Job. "You have given no water to the weary to drink, and you have withheld bread from the hungry" (Job 22:8). "You have sent widows away empty-handed, and the arms of the orphans you have crushed" (Job 22:9).

Zophar's last speech observes that wicked persons will not enjoy their riches because God will make their stomachs "vomit them up again" (Job 20:15) and that "They will give back the fruit of their toil, and will not swallow it down; from the profit from their trading they will get no fruit of their enjoyment" (Job 20:18). This is an appropriate righting of the wicked's wrongdoing, that "they have crushed and abandoned the poor, they have seized a house that they did not build" (Job 20:19). The reader knows this does not apply to Job. Why is Zophar so eager to blame Job? Are we sometimes too eager to follow in Zophar's footsteps when our friends face failures in work and life?

The book of Job demands that we see ourselves in the faces of Job's friends. We too — presumably — know right from wrong, and have some sense of God's ways. But we do not know *all* of God's ways as they apply in all times and places. "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it" (Psalm 139:6). God's ways are often a mystery beyond our understanding. Is it possible that we also are guilty of ignorant judgments against our friends and co-workers?

But it doesn't have to be friends who accuse us. Unlike Job, most of us are quite ready to accuse ourselves. Anyone who has tasted failure has likely pondered, "What have I done to deserve this?" It's natural, and not altogether incorrect. Sometimes out of sheer laziness, bad data or incompetence, we make poor decisions that cause us to fail at work. However, not all failures are the direct result of our own shortcomings. Many are the result of circumstances outside our control. Workplaces are complex, with many factors competing for our attention, many ambiguous situations, and many decisions where the outcomes are impossible to predict. How do we know whether we are following God's ways all the time? How could we or anyone genuinely know whether our successes and failures are due to our own actions or to factors beyond our control? How could an outsider judge the rightness of our actions without knowing the intimate details of our situations? Indeed, how could we even judge ourselves, give the limits of our own knowledge?

## Job's Friends Accuse Him of Abandoning God (Job 8-22)

Eventually, Job's friends move from questioning what Job did wrong to questioning whether Job has abandoned God (Job 15:4, 20:5). Along the way the friends encourage Job to return to God. Bildad directs Job to "make supplication to the Almighty" (Job 8:5) so that Job's future will be "very great" (Job 8:7) and filled with "laughter" and "shouts of joy" (Job 8:21). Eliphaz adjures him, "If you will return to the Almighty, you will be restored" (Job 22:23). Again, in general terms, this is good advice. We frequently do turn away from God and need to be recalled to him. However, we the readers know that Job has not done anything to deserve his suffering, and the effect of his friends' attacks is to make Job begin to doubt himself. Just when he needs his friends to believe in him, they keep him from believing in himself. How can they support him when they have already made up their mind about him?

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## Job Pleads His Case to God (Job 5-13)

In contrast, Job has wisdom many Christians lack. He knows to direct his emotions at God rather than at himself or those around him. He believes the source of blessings — and even adversities — is God, so he takes his complaint to the source. "But I would speak to the Almighty, and I desire to argue my case with God....How many are my iniquities and my sins? Make me know my transgression and my sin. Why do you hide your face, and count me as your enemy?" (Job 13:3, 23-24). He acknowledges he doesn't understand God's ways. "He does great things and unsearchable, marvelous things without number" (Job 5:9). He knows he can never prevail in an argument against God. "If one wished to contend with him, one could not answer him once in a thousand. He is wise in heart, and mighty in strength —who has resisted him, and succeeded?" (Job 9:3-4). But he knows his anguish has to come out somewhere. "Therefore I will not restrain my mouth; I will speak in the anguish of my spirit; I will complain in the bitterness of my soul" (Job 7:11). Better to direct it at God, who can handle it easily, than against himself or those he loves, who cannot.

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## Job's Friends Try to Protect God (Job 22-23)

We all know the demons that plague us after failure. We second-guess ourselves during sleepless nights of self-torment. It even feels like the holy thing to do — to protect God by blaming ourselves. If we second-guess ourselves like this, imagine how we second-guess our friends, though we are seldom aware of it. Job's friends show us how it's done. In their eagerness to protect God from Job's protestations, they increase their attacks on Job. Yet over the centuries, the Christian reading of Job has viewed the friends as tools of Satan, not God. God does not need protecting. He can take care of himself. Satan would like nothing more than to prove to God that Job served God only because God blessed him so richly. An admission by Job that he has done something wrong, when in reality he has

not, would be the first step towards validating the accuser's attack.

For example, Eliphaz's last speech concentrates on putting God above reproach. "Can a mortal be of use to God? Can even the wisest be of service to him?" (Job 22:2). "Is not God high in the heavens?" (Job 22:12). "Agree with God, and be at peace" (Job 22:21). "If the Almighty is your gold and your precious silver, then you will delight yourself in the Almighty, and lift up your face to God. You will pray to him and he will hear you" (Job 22:25-27).

Job, however, is not trying to blame God. He is trying to *learn from* God. Despite the horrible adversity God has permitted to afflict Job, Job believes that God can use the experience to shape his soul for the better. "When God has tested me, I shall come out like gold," Job says (Job 23:10). "For he will complete what he appoints for me, and many such things are in his mind" (Job 23:14). Paul Stevens and Alvin Ung have pointed out how many soul-shaping events occur at work.<sup>[3]</sup> The dark forces of the fallen world threaten to sap our souls there, yet God intends that our souls come out like gold, refined and molded into the particular likeness of God he has in mind for each of us. Imagine what life would be like if we could find spiritual growth not only when we are at church, but in all the hours we spend working. For this, we would need wise, sensitive spiritual counselors when we face trials at work. Job's friends, mired in mindlessly repeating conventional spiritual maxims, are of no help to him in this regard.

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## Job's Complaints Take on Special Significance for Our Work (Job 24)

Like Job's, our sufferings often begin with difficulties at work. But seldom are God's people equipped — or even willing — to help each other handle workplace failures and losses. We might go to a pastor or a Christian friend for help in a family or health issue, and they might be truly helpful. But would we ask them for help with workplace problems? If we did, how much help would we be likely to get?

For example, imagine you are treated unfairly by your boss, perhaps blamed for her mistake or humiliated during a legitimate disagreement. It would not be appropriate to reveal your feelings to customers, suppliers, students, patients or others you serve in your work. It would be harmful to complain to your co-workers, even to your friends among them. If the Christian community were equipped to help you deal with the situation, that could be a unique blessing. But not every church is fully equipped to help people handle work-related difficulties. Is this an area where churches need to improve?

We have seen that Job is not afraid to take his complaints — including work-related complaints — to God. The series of complaints in Job 24:1-12 and 22-25 particularly concerns work. Job complains that God lets evil people get away with injustice in work and economic activity. People appropriate public resources for personal gain, and they steal the private property of others (Job 24:2). They exploit the

weak and powerless to gain outsized profit for themselves (Job 24:3). The arrogant get their way at work, while the honest and humble are ground into the dirt (Job 24:4). The poorest have no opportunity to earn a living and are reduced to scavenging and even stealing from the rich to feed their families (Job 24:5-8). Others work hard, but do not earn enough to enjoy the fruits of their labor. “Though hungry, they carry the sheaves; between their terraces they press out oil; they tread the wine presses, but suffer thirst” (Job 24:10-11).

Job knows that all blessing comes from God, and all adversity is allowed — if not caused — by God. Therefore, we can feel the sharp sting in Job’s complaint, “From the city the dying groan, and the throat of the wounded cries for help; *yet God pays no attention to their prayer*” (Job 24:12). Job’s friends accuse him of forsaking God, but the evidence is that the righteous are forsaken *by God*. Meanwhile, the wicked seem to lead a charmed life. “God prolongs the life of the mighty by his power; they rise up when they despair of life. He gives them security, and they are supported; his eyes are upon their ways” (Job 24:22-23). Job believes the wicked will ultimately be cut down. “They are exalted a little while, and then are gone; they wither and fade like the mallow; they are cut off like the heads of grain” (Job 24:24). But why does God let the wicked prosper at all?

There is no answer in the book of Job, and there is no answer known to humanity. Economic adversity is an all-too-real pain that many Christians face for years or even a lifetime. We may have to abandon our education when we are young due to financial hardship, and it could prevent us from ever reaching our potential in the workplace. We may be exploited by others or scapegoated to the ruin of our careers. We may be born, struggle to survive, and die under the thumb of a corrupt government that keeps its people in poverty and oppression. These are merely a few work-related examples. In a million other ways, we may suffer serious, grievous, unfair harm that we can never even understand — much less remedy — in this life. By God’s grace, we hope never to become complacent in the face of injustice and suffering. Yet there are times when we cannot make things right, at least not right away. In those situations, we have only three choices: make up a plausible, but false explanation about how God allowed it to happen, as Job’s friends do; abandon God; or remain faithful to God without receiving an answer.

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## Wisdom Revealed (Job 28)

Job chooses to remain faithful to God. He understands that God’s wisdom is beyond his understanding. Job 28 employs mining as an analogy for searching for wisdom. It reveals that wisdom “is not found in the land of the living” (Job 28:13), but in the mind of God. “God understands the way to it and he knows its place” (Job 28:23). This is a reminder that technical knowledge and practical skill are not enough for truly meaningful work. We also need God’s spirit as we go about our tasks. We need God’s guidance far beyond the realm of things we commonly think of as “spiritual.” When a teacher tries to discern how a

student learns, when a leader tries to communicate clearly, when a jury tries to determine a defendant's intent, when an analyst tries to assess a project's risks, all need God's wisdom. Whatever the goal of our work is, "God understands the way to it, and he knows its place" (Job 28:23).

Yet we cannot always get in touch with God's wisdom. "It is hidden from the eyes of all living, and concealed from the birds of the air" (Job 28:21). Despite our best attempts — or sometimes because of our lackluster efforts — we may not find God's guidance for every action and decision. If so, it is better to recognize our ignorance than to put our stock in speculation or false wisdom. Sometimes humility is the best way to honor God. "Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding" (Job 28:28).

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## Job's Second Lament (Job 29-42)

As noted in the introduction, Job 29-42 marks a second cycle of lamentation-discourse-revelation that recapitulates the first. For example, in Job 29, Job's recollection of the good old days brings us back to his idyllic scene in chapter one. In Job 30, Job's distress that many now reject him reminds us of his wife's distancing herself in chapter 2. Job's lament in chapters 30 and 31 are prolonged versions of his lament in chapter 3. However, each phase in the second cycle brings a new emphasis.

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## Job Falls into Nostalgia and Self-Justification (Job 29-30)

The new emphases in Job's second lament (Job 29-42) are nostalgia and self-justification. Job "longs for the days when God watched over me" (Job 29:2) and "when the friendship of God was upon my tent" (Job 29:4). He reminisces about when his "steps were washed with milk, and the rock poured out for me streams of oil" (Job 29:6). He remembers how well respected he was in the community, which in the language of the Old Testament is most dramatically portrayed by his "seat in the square" near the "gate of the city" (Job 29:7). Job was well-received by the young and old alike (Job 29:8), and treated with unusual respect by the chiefs and nobles (Job 29:10). He was respected because he tended to the needs of the poor, fatherless, widows, blind, lame, needy, strangers and those dying (Job 29:12-16). He was their champion against the wicked (Job 29:17).

Job's nostalgia deepens his sense of loss when he realizes that much of the respect he received in work and civic life was superficial. "Because God has loosed my bowstring and humbled me, they have cast off restraint in my presence" (Job 30:11). "And now they mock me in song" (Job 30:9). Some people experience a similar sense of loss due to retirement, career setback, financial loss or any kind of perceived failure. We may question our identity and doubt our worth. Other people treat us differently when we have failed, or worse yet, they simply stay away from us. (At least Job's friends come to see him.) Former friends speak cautiously if they must be around us, lowering their voices as though

hoping that no one might find them near us. Maybe they think failure is a disease that's catching, or maybe being seen near a failure will brand them as a failure. "They abhor me, they keep aloof from me," laments Job (Job 30:10).

This is not to say that all civic and workplace friendships are shallow. It is true that some people befriend us only because we are useful to them, and then they abandon us when we cease to be useful. What really stings is the loss of what seemed to be genuine friendships.

In contrast to his first lament (Job 3), Job dishes up a large portion of self-justification in this round. "My justice was like a robe and a turban" (Job 29:14). "I was a father to the needy" (Job 29:16). Job touts his impeccable sexual purity (Job 31:1, 9-10). We have known all along that Job is not being punished for any fault. He may be accurate in his self-appraisal, but the self-justification is neither necessary nor endearing. Adversity may not always bring out the best in us. Yet God remains faithful, although Job is not able to see it at the moment, "for," as he later says, "I was in terror of calamity from God" (Job 31:23).

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## Job's Ethical Practices Apply to the Workplace (Job 31)

In the midst of Job's second lament (Job 29-42), he unveils a significant treatise on ethical behavior, which in some ways anticipates Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount" (Matthew 5-7). Although in the form of justifying his own practices, Job gives some principles that apply to many areas of our work lives:

1. Avoid falsehood and deceit (Job 31:5)
2. Don't let the ends justify the means, expressed as not allowing the heart (principles) to be lured astray by the eyes (expediency) (Job 31:7)
3. Practice generosity (Job 31:16-23)
4. Don't become complacent during times of prosperity (Job 31:24-28)
5. Don't make your success depend on the failure of others (Job 31:29)
6. Admit your mistakes (Job 31:33)
7. Don't try to get something for nothing, but pay properly for the resources you consume (Job 31:38-40)

Of particular interest is this passage about how he treats his employees:

If I have rejected the cause of my male or female slaves, when they brought a complaint against me, what then shall I do when God rises up? When he makes inquiry, what shall I answer him? Did not he who made me in the womb make them? And did not one fashion us in the womb? (Job 31:13-15).

A godly employer will treat employees with respect and dignity. This is particularly evident in the way

Job takes his servants' complaints seriously, especially those that were directed towards his own treatment of them. Job correctly points out that those in power will have to stand before God to defend their treatment of those under them. "What then shall I do when God rises up? When he makes inquiry, what shall I answer him?" (Job 31:14). God will inquire from subordinates how their superiors treated them. Superiors would be wise to ask their subordinates the same question while it is still possible to remedy their errors. The mark of true and humble followers of God is their openness to the possibility that they are in the wrong, which is most evidenced by their willingness to field any and all legitimate complaints. Wisdom is necessary for discerning which complaints do in fact merit attention. Yet the primary goal is to cultivate an environment in which subordinates know that superiors will entertain thoughtful and rational appeals. Although Job is talking about himself and his servants, his principle applies to any situation of authority: officers and soldiers, employers and employees, parents and children (raising kids is an occupation, too), leaders and followers.

Our time has seen great struggles for equality in the workplace with respect to race, religion, nationality, sex, class and other factors. The Book of Job anticipates these struggles by thousands of years. Yet Job goes beyond merely formal equality of demographic categories. He sees the equal dignity of every person in his household. We will become like Job when we treat each person with all the dignity and respect due to a child of God, regardless of our personal feelings or the sacrifice required on our part.

Of course, this truth does not preclude Christian bosses from establishing and exacting high standards in the workplace. However, it does require that the ethos of any workplace relationship be characterized by respect and dignity, especially on the part of the powerful.

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## Dialogue with Elihu (Job 32-37)

At this point, a young bystander named Elihu enters the discussion. His dialogue with Job parallels the discourse between Job and his friends in chapters 4-27. According to Elihu, the new element is that he is inspired to speak the wisdom Job's friends lacked. "One who is perfect in knowledge is with you," he announces (Job 36:4). Elihu then denounces the friends for their inability to defeat Job (Job 32:8, 18). Given his boast, and remembering that the more confidently Job's friends spoke against him, the more inaccurate their accusations became, we should not expect much wisdom from Elihu. For the most part, he simply re-iterates arguments made earlier. His agenda is the same as the friends', which is first to convince Job that he has done something to deserve this punishment, then to encourage Job to repent in order to receive restored blessings from God (Job 36:10-11). He does introduce one new work-related principle, that it is wrong to take bribes (Job 36:18). It is a true statement, discussed more deeply elsewhere in scripture, wrongly applied as a false accusation against Job.



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## God appears (Job 38-42:9)

In the book's first cycle, Job's friends' speeches were halted by the revelation of God's wisdom. The new element in the second cycle is that Elihu's speech is interrupted by the dramatic appearance of God himself (Job 38:1). At last, God fulfills Job's desire for a face-to-face encounter. The reader has been waiting to see if Job will finally break and curse God to his face. Instead, Job holds firm, but gets a further education about how far God's wisdom is beyond human knowing.

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## Who Can Comprehend the Wisdom of God? (Job 38:4-42:6)

God's first question to Job sets the tone of their mostly one-way conversation, "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding" (Job 38:4). Employing some of the most spectacular creation language in the Bible, God reveals his sole authorship of the wonders of creation. This has strong resonances with work. Our work reflects our creation in the image of God, the great Creator (Genesis 1-2). But here God dwells on work that only he is capable of doing. "Who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?" (Job 38:6-7). "Who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb" (Job 38:8). "Is it by your wisdom that the hawk soars, and spreads its wings toward the south? Is it at your command that the eagle mounts up and makes its nest on high?" (Job 39:26-27).

Curiously embedded in the midst of God's authority over the natural world is a profound insight into the human condition. God asks Job, "Who has put wisdom in the inward parts, or given understanding to the mind?" (Job 38:36). The answer, of course, is God. At once this both affirms our search for understanding and demonstrates its limits. The wisdom God puts in our inward parts makes it possible for us to yearn for an answer to the mystery of suffering. Yet our wisdom comes only from God, so we cannot outsmart God with wisdom of our own. In fact, he has implanted in us only a small fraction of his wisdom, so we will never have the capacity to comprehend all his ways. As we have seen, it may be good for our souls to voice our complaints against God. But it would be foolish to expect him to reply with, "Yes, I can see now that I was in error."

Further pursuing this unequal encounter, God issues an impossible challenge to Job: "Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? Anyone who argues with God must respond" (Job 40:2). Given Job's previous recognition that "I don't know" is often the wisest answer, his humble response is not surprising. "I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth" (Job 40:4).

Most commentators suggest that God is giving Job a larger picture of Job's circumstances. Much like someone who stands too close to a painting and cannot appreciate the artist's perspective, Job needs to step back a few steps so that he can glimpse — if not fully understand — God's larger purposes with



greater clarity.

God continues with a frontal assault on those who accuse God of wrongdoing in the administration of His creation. God repudiates Job's attempts at self-justification. "Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be justified?" (Job 40:8) Job's attempt to shift the blame harkens back to Adam's response when God asked whether he ate from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate" (Genesis 3:12).

Bringing our complaints to God is a good thing if we take the books of Job, Psalms and Habakkuk as inspired models for how to approach God in times of trouble. However, accusing God for the sake of covering our own failures is the height of hubris (Job 40:11-12). God repudiates Job for doing so. Yet even so, God does not condemn Job for voicing his complaint against God. Job's accusation against God is wrong beyond reason, but not beyond forgiveness.

Job gets the audience with God that he has been asking for. It does not answer his question whether he deserved the suffering he experienced. Job realizes the fault is his for expecting to know the answer, not God's for failing to provide it. "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful to me, which I did not know" (Job 42:3). Perhaps it is just that he is so awed by the presence of God that he no longer needs an answer.

If we are looking for a reason for Job's suffering, we will not find it either. On the one hand, Job's ordeal has given him an even greater appreciation for God's goodness. "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted" (Job 42:2). Job's relationship with God seems to have deepened, and he has become wiser as a result. He appreciates more than ever that his former prosperity was not due to his own strength and power. But the difference is only a matter of degree. Was the incremental improvement worth the unutterable loss? We don't get an answer to that question from Job or from God.

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## God Denounces Job's friends (Job 42:7-9)

God denounces the three friends whose arrogant proclamation of false wisdom had so tormented Job. In a satisfying and ironic twist, he declares that if Job prays on their behalf he will not punish them for their ignorant speeches in God's stead (Job 42:7-8). They, who wrongly urged Job to repent, must now depend on him to accept their repentance, and on God to fulfill Job's entreaty on their behalf. Job's act of praying on their behalf reminds us of the first chapter where Job prays for his children's protection. Job is a praying man, in season and out.

As part of our recovery from failure, we would do well to pray for those who have tormented or doubted us during our grief. Jesus later called us to pray for our enemies (Matthew 5:44, Luke 6:27-36), and this

teaching is seen in both contexts as more than simply therapeutic. If we can pray for those who have persecuted us, we can transcend the fleeting circumstances of life and begin to appreciate the picture from God's perspective.

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## Epilogue — Job's Prosperity Restored (Job 42:7-17)

The final section of Job contains a storybook ending in which many of Job's fortunes are restored. Many, but not all. He receives twice the wealth he had before (Job 42:10), plus a new brood of seven sons and three daughters (Job 42:13). But his first children are gone forever, a bad trade by any reckoning. Thus, even though we read that Job's latter life is blessed "more than his beginning" (Job 42:12), we know there must still be a bittersweet taste in his mouth. We know, following the resurrection of the Son of God, what Job could not have known, that God's final redemption comes only when Christ returns to bring his kingdom to fulfillment.

### Job Leaves an Inheritance for His Daughters (Job 42:13-15)

Job does something stunning in the aftermath of his ordeal. He leaves his daughters an inheritance, along with his sons (Job 42:15). Leaving an inheritance to female children was unheard of in the Ancient Near East, much as it was illegal in much of Europe right up to modern times. What could have caused Job to take this unprecedented step? Did his sorrow that he could do nothing for his deceased daughters give him the resolve to do everything he could for his living daughters? Was his grief the engine that drove him through the social barriers against women's equality in this regard? Did his suffering open his heart to others' suffering? Or were his obstreperous demands to know God's justice answered by a higher understanding of God's love for women and men? We cannot know the cause, but we can see the results. If nothing else in this life, the result of our suffering may be others' liberation.

### The Book Comes to an End (Job 42:7-17)

And so we leave the book of Job with observations and questions, rather than neat conclusions. Job proves faithful to God in prosperity and in adversity. This surely is a model for us. But the odious judgments made by his friends caution us against making too-certain application of any model to our own lives.

God proves faithful to Job. This is our ultimate hope and comfort. But we cannot predict how his faithfulness will be manifest in our lives until his promises are fulfilled in the new heaven and new earth. It would be folly to judge others, or even ourselves, based on the fractional evidence available to us, the paltry wisdom we are able to grasp and the minuscule perspectives we hold. To the hardest questions about the circumstances of our lives, the wisest answer may often be, "I don't know."

## Key Verses and Themes in Job

VERSE	THEME
<b>Job 1:9-10</b> Then Satan answered the Lord, “Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land.”	If loyalty to God is contingent on His prospering us, our faith will be shallow at best, questioned at worst.
<b>Job 1:20-21</b> Then Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshiped. He said, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.”	The most appropriate response to failures in our work lives is to acknowledge God’s authority over all matters of life, whether they appear to be good or bad.
<b>Job 28:28</b> The fear of the Lord —that is wisdom, and to depart from evil is understanding.	All meaningful success in God’s economy must begin with a healthy fear of the Lord.
<b>Job 31:13-15</b> “If I have rejected the cause of my male or female slaves, when they brought a complaint against me, what then shall I do when God rises up? When he makes inquiry, what shall I answer him? Did not he who made me in the womb make them? And did not one fashion us in the womb?”	Treating our employees as equals because they too have been created in God’s image necessarily produces respect and dignity in the relationship.
<b>Job 38:36</b> Who has put wisdom in the inward parts, or given understanding to the mind?	God is the creator and sustainer of all our abilities. Failure to acknowledge God’s role in our career successes reduces our perspective and sets us up for spiritual struggles.

## ENDNOTES

- [1] In Job, the Hebrew term ha-satan (“the accuser”) seems to be used as a title referring to the function performed by one of the “heavenly beings” in God’s retinue (Job 1:6), rather than a personal name for the devil. The meaning of this is much debated among scholars. It not our purpose to take a stance in this debate, so we have accepted the term used in all the major translations, namely, “Satan.”

- [2] The Hebrew word *tam*, translated as “integrity,” has the same root as *tummah*, translated in the same verse as “blameless.”
- [3] Paul Stevens and Alvin Ung, *Taking Your Soul to Work* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010).