

## *An Irreverent Summary of the Book of Job*

*Not to be used as a substitute for the real thing found in the Hebrew Bible, aka the Old Testament. I designed this summary to give the first time reader a sort of Cliff Notes version. The Story of Job just might be one of the oldest stories in human civilization. Variations of this tale predate much of written language and appear in a variety of ancient society's oral traditions before making it's way to a written form. In many ways, it is an old story written for modern people...indeed, for all time. – James Hazelwood*

Once upon a time...in a galaxy not so far away, lived a man named Job.

While that's not exactly how this ancient piece of literature begins, it should remind us that Job is both an old story as well as a very contemporary story. It is the story of every human being that has ever lived on this planet. The tale of a person who faces life in its full complexity and wonders why? Why is there suffering? What did I do to deserve this wound? Why am I singled out (you're not)?

Rabbi Harold Kushner captured everyone's attention years ago with his book, "Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People." I always wanted to write the sequel and call it, "Why do Good things Happen to Bad People?" but was told no one would buy it. How come? I asked. "Because most everyone thinks of themselves as the Good ones. And frankly, if anyone does embrace themselves as bad, they probably aren't in the market for a book.

I'm not going to lie to you. The problem of suffering and our struggle to find an answer, to find the real meaning of human suffering is not going to be solved by this book. Countless others have tried, and their efforts are worth a deep dive. No, you won't find the final definitive answer here. But, I hope what you will discover is that you are not alone.

Here you will find the stories of people who have weathered the storms of life. That does not mean they all had happy endings; most would not say that. However, most would say, as one person commented, "I found a happy enough ending."

But before we dive into an in-depth analysis of life, hope, and suffering, let's discover this beautiful story of Job. What follows is a paraphrase of the tale of the man from Uz. No doubt, the literalists, the scholars, and theologians will find faults with my attempt. But, my purpose here is not to provide a literal translation. You can see that elsewhere. (Eugene Peterson's The Message) My approach is to render this ancient tale in a story suitable for prime time—a version that dispenses with the lengthy sidebars and repetitive pedantic. What follows is the story of a man who had it all, lost it all, and wondered why. Why me, what did I do wrong.

Once upon a time not so far away lived a man named Job. He lived in Uz, which is a place no one has ever heard of, kind of like Quonochataug, Rhode Island. Job prospered in both fame and fortune. He had a reputation for being the most faithful, loyal, and reliable citizen of his time. True, his family seemed to enjoy a life of partying, but Job was content to clean up and atone for the excessive celebrations. But, Job's character remained intact.

While Job lived his remarkable life, the courtiers and observers of human life gathered in heaven for their regular oversight meetings. The Lord boasted of his most admired servant, namely Job. But one of the litigators decided on this sunny morning to offer a challenge to the almighty.

"Your honor, if I may. I think it's easy to see why you are so proud of Job; after all, he does seem to be a person of great integrity. However, he's got it pretty easy. I mean, look at his life - a nice house, a nice family, good health, plenty of wealth and land. But, if he didn't have it so good, would he be so faithful?"

So the Lord and this instigator litigator who sometimes goes by the name, A.C. Cuser but more commonly known as S. A. Tan, agreed on a little experiment with one condition, don't harm the man. Observers often wonder if the Lord should have been more precise in negotiating this contract for this arrangement.

The instigator litigator set about on a series of tests. First, he (why is it so often a he?) arranged for a robbery of some of Job's assets, then an inconvenient natural disaster, another theft, followed by a tornado. That twister crushed one of Job's homes while his adult children were having a party.

In anguish, Job lamented, cried, and responded as most of us would. However, he never blamed God for these events. He acknowledged what we all know to be true, namely we come into this world naked, and we leave naked. In between, life happens, there is give and take. But then Job added something admirable. He offered gratitude and blessings to God's holy name.

So the instigator litigator realized he needed to up the ante. During one of the daily briefings on Cloud Nine as the angels gathered with the Lord for updates, the debate continued between the Lord and S.A. God opened the morning meeting with a bit of posturing and boasting about how admirably Job had responded despite S.A.'s attempts at reading havoc.

"Yea, Yea, sure it's easy when it's not the person. Human beings are ultimately in the self-preservation business. Let's amend the contract and let me test his physical health."

The Lord agreed. Some of the attenders at this briefing whispered in the background. They wondered how this decision might play out in the tabloids and on Social Media. The Press Secretary scurried off to a meeting. (OK, there is

no evidence this happened. Nor is there any evidence the meeting took place on a cloud...I'll admit you got me here)

Next thing you know, Job has terrible sores, ulcers, and a severe case of eczema herpeticum. Job's wife enters the scene from stage left (why she took so long we do not know, wouldn't the death of her children have brought an earlier entrance?) She finds her husband in the backyard near the compost pile. She unloads her grief on him and laments his lack of anger at God.

But, Job doesn't take the bait and reminds all of us that life is filled with bad days and good days. He says nothing against God.

The tale of Job takes a surprisingly pleasant turn, though it is not a pleasant story, and my light-hearted retelling should not be construed as making light of his or anyone's sufferings. Instead, I'm merely trying to help us all see that this is a Story, a Tale, a Myth, a Fable. There's little evidence that these events happened. And yet, the truth of the story is that a variation of this tale happens every day to everyone in every land. But more on that later.

Job's friends hear of his trials and tribulations. They are concerned, so they pack their travel belongs and journey to the land of Uz, to be with their friend Job. Upon arrival, his friends can't believe their eyes. They are stunned and feel for their comrade. Eli, Bill, and Zophar spend a week grieving alongside their close friend Job. They do what is most appropriate when people we love are in deep pain. They show up. They don't offer advice, they show up and join the grief. For a week, they sit with him in silence, extending the one gift we humans can offer to others in times of loss, sorrow, and great disappointment.

Then out of that experience of friendship, compassion, and silence, Job can articulate his pain. He wails and cries, even wondering why he was born, allowed to live. He wants his life erased. What's the point of all this, why am I to experience such gut-wrenching anguish. Job expresses what everyone and anyone would wish to express, deep pain, and loss. Indeed, Job gives us all permission to cry out.

While his friends helped him get to this point by sitting with him, being with him in compassion and heartache, they just couldn't help themselves. They had to steep out of their grieving with Job and step into a vain attempt of explaining.

His friend Eli is first to venture down this road. He offers an analysis of Job's faults. Eli was a wonderful friend of Job; then he opened his mouth. His long speech essentially points to sin as the root of all evil, and therefore Job, well, "you must have done something wrong to deserve this suffering." It's especially hard news and exacerbated by the arrogance with which it is delivered.

Job understandably responds in anger to Eli. "I don't need to be condemned at a time like this."

Bill steps forward next, offering a variation on the theme, and successfully makes things worse. He provides a theologian's response combined with a

preacher's arrogance of assuming he could speak for God. Bill primarily offers up the idea, "how dare you question God? The Lord is mighty and good and majestic." While Bill had sat for a week in silence with Job, one wonders if he spent that time reading Systematic theology and hardbound Philosophy textbooks, so he could prepare for this moment. Job needs prayers, and instead, Bill offers dialectics.

Ironically, Job, even in his emotional state of loss, manages a sound defense of God. Acknowledging a humble state as a human relating to an all-powerful deity.

Zophar takes his turn as self-help guru and presider of puritan morality. Unable to engage in nuance, Zo simply offers the warning that Job is essentially slime, and if he had any sense, he'd simply flip a switch and turn his life over to JEEEZUS and start singing "You are my Sunshine."

Job offers a passing response of sarcasm at Zophar's superiority and then proceeds to lament how they have gone from compassionate friends to ridiculers in chief. He's done with his friends and their unhelpful soulless responses. He's experienced more judgment and comfort.

Job then turns his attention to God, not to ideas about God, or books about God and Human Suffering, but directly to God. For what seems like days, maybe weeks or months, Job asks the single and central question of humanity amid loss, disappointment, and suffering: Where are you? Why are you silent? Do I matter to you? What's the point of all of this? What's the point of having any kind of relationship with you, Lord, if you are going to remain so distant?

His friends come back around for more debate, mostly rehashing their same arguments with new words. They add variations and, at one point, even suggest, maybe Job is enjoying this misery. The bottom line his friends maintained through our this dark night of the soul is that Job must have done something to deserve all this suffering. What else can explain it? At the end of all the debates, Job is exhausted. Yet still convinced of both his faithfulness as well as God's goodness and holiness. However, Job still feels very much alone.

Suddenly a young braggadocio named Hugh comes on the scene. Like a recent college graduate, he espouses for a long time, occasionally stopping to catch his breath. His speech is lovely, noble, and an excellent exposition on the glory of God, the wisdom of God, the beauty of God. In another setting, it would receive a standing ovation. But, here while suffering, it is merely insensitive. Does one wonder if any of these speeches about God have an audience at the moment like this moment?

After all this hot air, God finally shows up amid the eye of a hurricane. The voice is speaking when all-around 150 mph winds surround. Yes....finally, we hear from the main character, the one whom this whole epic heroic journey is about. In a lengthy and careful response, God shows up.

What is so striking is the opening speech. It is filled with questions.

“Who is this that speaks without wisdom?”

“Where were you when time began, and I created all this?”

“Have you traveled all across this planet, from mountain top to ocean depths?”

“And what about the stars and galaxies, been there?”

“Who brings rain, drought, lightning?”

God's torrent of questions establishes this deity beyond all that Job (or anyone else) can know. But these questions also change the entire dynamic of this tale. We have witnessed a consistent monologue by nearly everyone from Job through his friends. But, now...now it's all changed. By entering with a flood of questions, God changes this monologue to a dialogue. Although that dialogue is quite limited and one-sided, it nevertheless reveals something so profound yet easily missed. Namely, we are now in a relationship with God.

True, the answers God asks of Job are answerable. But, by asking Job these questions, one cannot help but wonder if God too has been impacted by this relationship. Surely the Lord has heard all these speeches, listened to Job's friends' pontificate and felt, dare we say, the anguish of Job. God has tired of the bellicose speeches of the friends and prefers Job's direct engagement. “They have spoken about me, but you have spoken to me.”

In the end, Job is in awe of God. Yet that awe does not prevent Job from participating in the conversation. “You ask who is the one challenging, questioning, offering ignorant ideas. I'll admit it was me. I have to admit it's because I heard rumors of your existence, but now. Now you show up, and boy have you shown up. I get it. I'm humbled, and I'm grateful.”

The friends are dismissed for their unhelpful tirades. They are to be punished, but Job asks for God's mercy, and God grants it. Yes, even the self-help gurus, critics, and theologizers receive God's grace. Job's life, family, and fortune are restored, and the man lives to be 140.

In some ways, it's a Hollywood feel-good ending. But the real lesson is not the reward at the end; it's the reward of the engagement between what used to be a faraway distant deity to a companion on life's journey, suffering and all.