

TEN PRINCIPLES FOR UNDERSTANDING THE BOOK OF JOB

by Shawn D. Handran

Job is one of the most difficult books to understand in the Bible and is almost entirely poetry, making interpretation even more challenging. Of the seven voices (Narrator, Job, Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, Elihu, and the LORD), all save the Narrator are presented as somewhat lengthy discourses or speeches. At first glance, Job's discourses appear to contradict the teaching of other parts of the Bible (e.g., see chapter 24, where Job describes the widespread injustice on the earth, asking why the Almighty doesn't appear to be doing anything about it) and the discourses of his friends appear to draw support from other parts of the Bible (e.g., see Bildad's response in chapter 25, upholding the righteousness and power of God), yet at the end of the book, the LORD says that Job has spoken correctly and his friends have not. How is one to interpret this apparent contradiction? Let me offer the following series of observations for you to consider as you read and study the book of Job for yourself.

1. Job had an oversimplified, and thus incorrect view of the LORD's justice and mercy.
2. Job's three friends, like Job, had an oversimplified and incorrect view of the LORD's justice and mercy.
3. Job's focus was on the LORD's mercy, whereas the focus of Job's friends were on the flip side of the coin—the LORD's justice.
4. Both views were partially incorrect because of the oversimplification. Job equated obedience (by his own definition) as the requirement (or reward) to receive the LORD's mercy, which in practical terms for Job was his wealth and abundance of blessings. Job's friends oversimplified the cause and effect—they saw that misfortune befell Job and, using their oversimplified logic, concluded or reasoned that it must have resulted from Job's sin—which they hadn't seen or witnessed—they inferred Job must have sinned based on what they currently saw.
5. Job's discourses are therefore mainly "rants" or "dumping" that a person in the midst of enormous pain goes through as they process what is happening to them

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and questioning why it is happening to them.

6. Job's friend's responses are well-meaning but unhelpful (not to mention incorrect), and are in fact more harmful than beneficial to Job—that is, they actually provoked Job into his rants. Today, these types of responses would be called oversimplified platitudes or stereotypical “pat” answers to questions and matters of great complexity.
7. Elihu introduces the idea that matters (reality) are not as simple as Job and his friends have made them out to be, citing greater purpose in suffering. C.C. Ryrie¹ observes that suffering is a “refinement process that the LORD uses to break people of self-reliance in order to completely trust in Him.” Elihu's discourses thus pave or prepare the way for the LORD's response, beginning in Chapter 38 (although Elihu is not free from error himself either).
8. The LORD's response or main message is that we don't understand simple things—how then can we hope to understand complex things, like the underlying causes of suffering?
9. Although Job ranted, he never gave up or repudiated his faith and trust in the LORD, thus the LORD restores him and

disciplines Job's friends for their error. Job was wrong to equate blessings with mercy, which doesn't tarnish or reflect badly on the LORD *per se*—that is, Job's misunderstanding of mercy did not slander the LORD. In contrast (and this is one of the main reasons why the book of Job is so difficult to understand and interpret), the misunderstanding of Job's friends did “reflect badly” on the LORD and slander Him for it made the LORD the author of suffering.

10. Today, we are like Job and his three friends, having an oversimplified view of the LORD's mercy and justice. Our view should be more like the LORD's, but the LORD Himself said that we can't understand things (see Job 38-41 and Isaiah 55:8-9). Therefore, the “best” we can do is to think more like Elihu (chapters 32-37)². The greatest challenge in reading Job is discerning which passages are the “incorrect” views and which are the correct, for all five of the human voices (Job, Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar and Elihu) contain errors and span a spectrum between the correct and incorrect (oversimplified) view of the LORD's mercy and justice.

¹ Ryrie Study Bible, Moody Press, 1971, p. 747

² Note: this in itself is an oversimplified view and not correct advice to follow in a strictly literal sense—that is, Elihu's discourse has its share of hasty, wordy and partially incorrect views as well.