

Ten Principles for Understanding the Book of Job

by Shawn Handran

The book of Job is one of the most difficult books in the Bible to understand. It is almost entirely poetry, which adds another layer of complexity to interpretation. Of the seven voices in the book—Narrator, Job, Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, Elihu, and the LORD—only the Narrator speaks in prose. All the rest appear in extended discourses of Hebrew poetry. At first glance the speeches are confusing. Job sometimes seems to contradict other parts of Scripture (e.g., unchecked injustice in ch. 24), while his friends appear to support biblical truths (e.g., Bildad's affirmation of God's righteousness in ch. 25). Yet the book ends with the LORD declaring that Job has spoken correctly and his friends have not. How do we make sense of this? The following observations may help as you read and study the book of Job.

1. Job held an oversimplified—and therefore incomplete—view of the LORD's justice and mercy.

Job believed blessings followed obedience and struggled when reality did not match his present circumstances.

2. Job's three friends shared the same oversimplified and incomplete view.

They assumed suffering must result from sin and inferred Job's guilt from his circumstances.

3. Job emphasized the LORD's mercy, while his friends focused almost entirely on the LORD's justice.

Both perspectives contained truth but were incomplete on their own.

4. Both perspectives were partially true but ultimately flawed because they were too simple.

Job assumed that obedience, as he understood it, entitled him to receive mercy, which he associated with his former prosperity and blessings. His friends assumed the opposite: because Job was suffering, they reasoned that he must have sinned. Lacking evidence, they inferred guilt from circumstances alone.

5. Job's speeches are best understood as the raw expressions of a person in deep agony.

His words reflect a man wrestling with pain, confusion, and unanswered questions.

6. The responses of Job's friends were well-intended but misguided.

Their explanations offered simplistic, formulaic answers to matters far more complex than they realized. Instead of helping Job, their words provoked him further.

7. Elihu adds an important layer to the discussion by reminding Job and his friends that reality is not as simple as they have portrayed it.

He introduces the idea that suffering may serve a higher purpose. Suffering can act as a refinement process through which the LORD breaks people of self-reliance so they may more fully trust Him. Elihu's perspective prepares the way for the LORD's speech in ch. 38.

8. The LORD's response emphasizes our limited understanding.

If we cannot grasp even the ordinary workings of creation, how can we possibly hope to grasp the deeper reasons behind suffering?

9. Although Job cried out bitterly, he never abandoned his faith in the LORD.

For this the LORD restores him, while disciplining his friends for their misguided accusations. Job was mistaken to equate blessings with mercy, but this misunderstanding did not slander the LORD. In contrast, the errors of Job's friends *did* misrepresent the LORD by making Him appear to be the cause of Job's suffering. This is one of the main reasons the book is so challenging to interpret.

10. We are much like Job and his friends today.

We often carry simplistic notions of the LORD's justice and mercy. Ideally our thinking should reflect the LORD's perspective, yet He Himself tells us that we cannot understand His ways (see Job 38–41; Isaiah 55:8–9). Therefore, the best we can do is to adopt a posture closer to Elihu's—recognizing both God's sovereignty and our own limitations. The greatest challenge in reading the book of Job lies in distinguishing between the contextually accurate and inaccurate statements in the various speeches. All five human speakers—Job, Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Elihu—contain both insight and error, spanning a range from truth to oversimplification. This calls for humility, trust, and careful discernment when reading the book of Job.