The Book of Job

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with Little Rock Scripture Study staff



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Welcome

The Bible is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. It is the Spirit-inspired word of God for us. It reveals to us the God who created, redeemed, and guides us still. It speaks to us personally and as a church. It forms the basis of our public liturgical life and our private prayer lives. It urges us to live worthily and justly, to love tenderly and wholeheartedly, and to be a part of building God's kingdom here on earth.

Though it was written a long time ago, in the context of a very different culture, the Bible is no relic of the past. Catholic biblical scholarship is among the best in the world, and in our time and place, we have unprecedented access to it. By making use of solid scholarship, we can discover much about the ancient culture and religious practices that shaped those who wrote the various books of the Bible. With these insights, and by praying with the words of Scripture, we allow the words and images to shape us as disciples. By sharing our journey of faithful listening to God's word with others, we have the opportunity to be stretched in our understanding and to form communities of love and learning. Ultimately, studying and praying with God's word deepens our relationship with Christ.

The Book of Job

The resource you hold in your hands is divided into six lessons. Each lesson involves personal prayer and study using this book and the experience of group prayer, discussion, and wrap-up lecture.

If you are using this resource in the context of a small group, we suggest that you meet six times, discussing one lesson per meeting. Allow about 90 minutes for the small group gathering. Small groups function best with eight to twelve people to ensure good group dynamics and to allow all to participate as they wish.

Some groups choose to have an initial gathering before their regular sessions begin. This allows an opportunity to meet one another, pass out books, and, if desired, view the optional intro lecture for this study available on the "Resources" page of the Little Rock Scripture Study website (littlerockscripture.org). Please note that there is only one intro lecture for two-part studies.

Every Bible study group is a little bit different. Some of our groups like to break each lesson up into two weeks of study so they are reading less each week and have more time to discuss the questions together at their weekly gatherings. If your group wishes to do this, simply agree how

much of each lesson will be read each week, and only answer the questions that correspond to the material you read. Wrap-up lectures can then be viewed at the end of every other meeting rather than at the end of every meeting. Of course, this will mean that your study will last longer, and your group will meet more times.

WHAT MATERIALS WILL YOU USE?

The materials in this book include:

- The text of Job, using the New American Bible, Revised Edition as the translation.
- Commentary by Kathleen M. O'Connor (which has also been published separately as part of the New Collegeville Bible Commentary series).
- Occasional inserts  highlighting elements of the chapters of Job being studied. Some of these appear also in the *Little Rock Catholic Study Bible* while others are supplied by staff writers.
- Questions for study, reflection, and discussion at the end of each lesson.
- Opening and closing prayers for each lesson, as well as other prayer forms available in the closing pages of the book.

In addition, there are wrap-up lectures available for each lesson. Your group may choose to purchase a DVD containing these lectures or make use of the video lectures available online at no charge. The link to these free lectures is: LittleRockScripture.org/Lectures/Job. Of course, if your group has access to qualified speakers, you may choose to have live presentations.

Each person will need a current translation of the Bible. We recommend the *Little Rock Catholic Study Bible*, which makes use of the New American Bible, Revised Edition. Other translations, such as the New Jerusalem Bible or the New Revised Standard Version: Catholic Edition, would also work well.

HOW WILL YOU USE THESE MATERIALS?

Prepare in advance

Using Lesson One as an example:

- Begin with a simple prayer like the one found on page 11.

- Read the assigned material for Lesson One (pages 12–21) so that you are prepared for the weekly small group session.
- Answer the questions, Exploring Lesson One, found at the end of the assigned reading, pages 22–24.
- Use the Closing Prayer on page 25 when you complete your study. This prayer may be used again when you meet with the group.

Meet with your small group

- After introductions and greetings, allow time for prayer (about 5 minutes) as you begin the group session. You may use the prayer on page 11 (also used by individuals in their preparation) or use a prayer of your choosing.
- Spend about 45–50 minutes discussing the responses to the questions that were prepared in advance. You may also develop your discussion further by responding to questions and interests that arise during the discussion and faith-sharing itself.
- Close the discussion and faith-sharing with prayer, about 5–10 minutes. You may use the Closing Prayer at the end of each lesson or one of your choosing at the end of the book. It is important to allow people to pray for personal and community needs and to give thanks for how God is moving in your lives.
- View the wrap-up lecture associated with each lesson (15–20 minutes). You may watch the lecture online, use a DVD, or provide a live lecture by a qualified local speaker. View the lecture together at the end of the session or, if your group runs out of time, you may invite group members to watch the lecture on their own time after the discussion.

A note to individuals

- If you are using this resource for individual study, simply move at your own pace. Take as much time as you need to read, study, and pray with the material.
- If you would like to share this experience with others, consider inviting a friend or family member to join you for your next study. Even a small group of two or three provides an opportunity for fruitful dialog and faith-sharing!

The Book of Job

LESSON ONE

Introduction and Job 1–3

Begin your personal study and group discussion with a simple and sincere prayer such as:

Prayer

Lord, grant that we may see your hand in every trial and triumph of our lives, knowing you are never absent from your people. May we remain steadfast in the belief that whatever our circumstances, you will never abandon us, for you are our rock and our salvation.

Read the Introduction on pages 12–13 and the Bible text of Job 1–3, found in the outside columns of pages 14–21, highlighting what stands out to you.

Read the accompanying commentary to add to your understanding.

Respond to the questions on pages 22–24, Exploring Lesson One.

The Closing Prayer on page 25 is for your personal use and may be used at the end of group discussion.

INTRODUCTION

The book of Job is vivid testimony to pain, a plea for justice, and a wrenching theological debate about suffering and its causes. Central to this debate are questions about the roles God and humans play in causing human suffering and whether divine-human relationship can proceed in the midst of overwhelming anguish. Like a riddle, the text grasps readers' minds and emotions, inviting them to participate in Job's story and to work toward their own solution to the dilemmas of both Job and his friends.

Literary features

The book's literary components do not fit easily together. It sets conflicting characters and discordant speeches side by side without providing interpretive clues. But rather than producing a mishmash of ideas, the resulting tensions summon readers to engage in Job's struggle, to stay with him on the ash heap and stand with him before God in search of healing. Because the book refuses to leave our present understandings intact, reading means undertaking mental and emotional labor. Job and his friends argue with each other in dense, beautiful poetic speeches, and they complain at length to wear the reader down. In the process, the poems bring us into Job's despair and his friends' frustration and growing rigidity.

But the effort required to read and study the book is worth it because the book's unsettled nature puts us either in Job's place or in sympathy with his friends or, perhaps, both. Precisely because it refuses to settle for easy answers about any of its subjects, the book of Job is a classic of world literature.

Most interpreters believe the book as we now have it is a composite, built upon an ancient tale about an innocent sufferer. The outlines of Job's story were well-known across cultures in antiquity. Peoples of the ancient Near East produced several texts with affinities to the biblical book where an innocent person undergoes suffering, argues with the gods, and is inexplicably restored to well-being. Job also appears by name in a biblical list of heroes (Ezek 14:14, 20), adding to the sense that his basic story was widely known.

It is likely that a writer in ancient Israel took this folktale, adapted it, cut it open, and then set the poetic speeches in the midst of it. The prose narrative appears in the prologue (1:1–2:13) and epilogue (42:7-17). By using both forms of literature, folktale and poetry, the book presents a totality of suffering, an overwhelming portrait told from outside by a third person narrator in the prose and from the inside in the poetic testimony of Job and his friends. The prose describes Job's external losses, while the poetry portrays Job's more internal sufferings.

Poetry is particularly suited to the task of spiritual struggle because its dense imagery, compactness of speech, and allusiveness create an artistic world something like music. It appeals to the full humanity of readers, summoning forth our own ghosts, unsettled sorrows, and hidden angers. It can transport us into realms of spirit and lead to new discoveries. But the poetry of Job makes best sense when read in the context of the prose narrative that lays out the book's initial problem. Job is an innocent person yet enormous catastrophes befall him because of a deal made in heaven. This predicament gives rise to the poetry.

The prose and the poetry belong together, but there are great differences between them. In the prologue, for example, Job is patient and trusting while his friends are silent. By contrast, in the poetry Job is furious and impatient and his friends flood him with words. This is one of the many gaps that raise questions about characters and their motivations, thereby engaging us in Job's plight.

Job's poetry uses a great deal of legal imagery as a way for Job to imagine that God might acknowledge his innocence. Job appeals to a third party to assist him in his search for justice because his informal appeals to God seem to produce nothing but more sorrow. He declares legal oaths of innocence by which he offers his self-defense at the end of his speeches. But legal language is only one way Job voices his complaints. Language of creation and ob-

servations from the world of plants and animals help him build his protests.

Much of Job's speech takes the form of lamentation. Over one third of the book of Psalms and the entire book of Lamentations are laments. These are prayers in the form of complaint. The one who prays cries out to God in pain, describes various forms of affliction, and seeks redress. Laments are a form of truth-telling to God. They open up rather than deny suffering, and they present to God the affliction of the one who prays and demands action. In Old Testament laments, anger at God and fury close to blasphemy are instruments of fidelity because they keep the relationship with God alive in the midst of suffering. They are acts of faith that God cares for the afflicted and can bear to hear the truth. By using laments, Job grows strong and courageous as he clings to God under the worst conditions.

Wisdom literature

The book of Job belongs in a grouping of biblical books called the wisdom literature that includes Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Sirach, and the Wisdom of Solomon. These books differ from other biblical literature in their attention to daily struggles of ordinary human life. By contrast, the prophetic books speak of God's word to the people, and the historical books tell of God's actions on behalf of Israel. Wisdom starts neither with God nor with large political and national events, but from human efforts to live wisely from day to day. Life's challenges give rise to theological reflection, not the other way around. Job is merely going on with his daily life when disasters overtake him, and those events propel his theological questions. In wisdom thinking, at least in the book of Proverbs, faithful living should yield material blessing. When Job loses everything, his fidelity to God is suspect.

Job's cultural world

Job lived in a different cultural world from that of contemporary Western readers, though people in tribal communities on various continents may find many affinities with aspects of the book. Job lived in a community-oriented culture. The family and clan were of high value, and one sought to become wise and learn proverbs in order to create harmony for the community, not for self-advancement as in individual-oriented cultures.

Israel's culture as reflected in wisdom literature was deeply concerned about the authenticity of speech, about proper use of the tongue, and about wise sayings or proverbs as a key to right behavior. Proverbs are short sayings that were instruments of wise living and the storehouse of tradition. Because the culture was an oral one, the right use of words was critical for communal well-being. Wisdom drawn from animal and plant life instructed humans in how to maneuver in daily life and how to contribute to the community. Both Job and his friends apply proverbs to his situation, but their proverbs usually conflict with one another.

Other features of ancient Israel's culture important for understanding the book include the values of honor and shame. Shame was a communal judgment, often implicit, that one's behavior or attitude brought dishonor to the community. To be shamed means one has been disrespectful of persons or basic values in the community. Job begins the story as a most honorable person, but his disasters cause him shame and isolation from his friends. He loses his good name and his community no longer recognizes his honor, isolating him and causing him great anguish.

Outline of the book

The book divides into the following literary units:

The Prologue (1:1–2:13)
Three Rounds of Speeches among Job and His Friends (3:1–14:22; 15:1–21:34; 22:1–31:40)
Hymn to Wisdom (28:1-28)
Job's Self-Defense (29:1–31:40)
Elihu's Speeches (32:1–37:24)
The Encounter with God in the Storm (38:1–42:6)
The Epilogue (42:7-17)

I: Prologue

CHAPTER 1

Job's Piety

[1]In the land of Uz there was a blameless and upright man named Job, who feared God and avoided evil. [2]Seven sons and three daughters were born to him; [3]and he had seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred she-donkeys, and a very large household, so that he was greater than anyone in the East. [4]His sons used to take turns giving feasts, sending invitations to their three sisters to eat and drink with them. [5]And when each feast had run its course, Job would send for them and sanctify them, rising early and offering sacrifices for every one of them. For Job said, "It may be that my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts." Job did this habitually.

continue



PROLOGUE

Job 1:1–2:13

The prose prologue begins with a depiction of a contented Job, residing in security, wealth, and domestic tranquility. A narrator describes events that move through the slow but complete unraveling of these good things and end in grief on the ash heap. Events alternate in the five scenes between earth and heaven; events in heaven determine what happens on earth. The narrative unfolds in highly stylized fashion with sparse detail and repeated patterns typical of a folktale. The effects of this narrative style are to present a hammering sequence of events that shatters Job's world and leaves many unanswered questions about divine and human characters and their motivations.

1:1-5 Job's goodness

The opening scene takes place on earth where every detail contributes to a portrait of Job as an innocent man, beloved of God. The narrator calls him "blameless and upright," one who "feared God," and "avoided evil" (1:1). To "fear God" is a common term of the wisdom literature that has less to do with fright before God and more to do with right relationship with God. "Fear of God" is not easy to translate into English but conveys qualities of obedience, reverence, and awe before God. One commentator calls it a synonym for true religion. Job's fear of God marks him as a wise and righteous man. His large family and vast wealth in animal holdings confirm his blamelessness and special relationship with God. In antiquity, material wealth signified that its bearer was a worthy recipient of divine favor.

Job's uprightness receives further confirmation from the size of his family and the peaceful generosity of his children. His seven sons invite his three daughters to their feasts, showing their hospitality to exceed the bounds of their culture where women had little status. And perhaps most indicative of Job's righteousness is a detail in which he exceeds all obvious requirements of care for his family by offering sacrifice on behalf of his children in case they have sinned "in their hearts" (1:5). In its spare telling, the story leaves readers to ponder Job's behavior. Is he an overly scrupulous parent? Does he act to protect the children? Or is this one more instance of his absolute devo-

tion to God? The folktale genre of the prologue, however, may preclude suspicions about Job's character, for folktales typically tell actions as straightforward events to be taken at face value. The next scenes support the view that fidelity alone motivates Job.

1:6-12 Deal in heaven

The action starts when messengers, called "sons of God," come before "the LORD" in the heavenly court. Heavenly courts with semi-divine beings of the spirit world appear elsewhere in the Old Testament (1 Kgs 22:19-23; Dan 7). Among the heavenly messengers is "the satan," whose name means "the adversary," an official court title, not a proper name. He is not yet the demonic figure of later Jewish and Christian thinking, but one of the Lord's faithful servants, though it is easy to see from his role here how he might later come to personify evil.

The Lord starts the action by asking the satan if, when traveling to and fro on the earth, he had noticed "my servant Job" (1:8). Should

The Interview Between the Lord and the Satan

6 One day, when the sons of God came to
present themselves before the LORD, the satan also
came among them. 7 The LORD said to the satan,
"Where have you been?" Then the satan answered
the LORD and said, "Roaming the earth and pa-
trolling it." 8 The LORD said to the satan, "Have you
noticed my servant Job? There is no one on earth
like him, blameless and upright, fearing God and
avoiding evil." 9 The satan answered the LORD and
said, "Is it for nothing that Job is God-fearing?
10 Have you not surrounded him and his family and
all that he has with your protection? You have
blessed the work of his hands, and his livestock are
spread over the land. 11 But now put forth your
hand and touch all that he has, and surely he will
curse you to your face." 12 The LORD said to the
satan, "Very well, all that he has is in your power;

continue



Who Is Satan?

Originally, "Satan" was not what Christians understand as the devil. Rather, it was any opponent, human or heavenly. The Hebrew word *satan* simply means "adversary." Several of Solomon's political opponents are referred to as *satan* in the original Hebrew text (1 Kgs 11:14, 23, 25). When Balaam sets out to curse (or bless) the Israelites, the angel of the Lord stands in his way as a *satan* to stop him (Num 22:22, 32).

In books of the Old Testament that were written later, the *satan* often acts as a kind of prosecuting attorney, pointing out human failings to God and testing their fidelity. In First Chronicles a *satan* lures David into taking a census (21:1). The high priest Joshua, who symbolically bears the sins of the people, is accused by a *satan* standing at the Lord's right hand (Zech 3:1-5). The *satan* who appears in the book of Job has this same function. He is a member of God's divine council, one of the "sons of God" (later considered to be angels). He defends God's rights, pointing out that Job may be taking advantage of God, and is given permission to test Job's virtue.

The understanding of a *satan* as an opponent and accuser of human beings forms the foundation of the New Testament figure of Satan. In the New Testament Satan is no longer defending God but rather is attempting to separate people from God through temptation and deceit. Even Jesus is tempted by Satan (Mark 1:13). The earlier understanding of the word *satan* as an opponent does appear, however, when Peter attempts to convince Jesus that he will not suffer and die. Jesus says, "Get behind me, Satan. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do" (Mark 8:33).

In the New Testament the figure of evil called Satan is also termed the "devil," a word derived from the Greek translation of *satan*, which is *diabolos*.

only do not lay a hand on him." So the satan went forth from the presence of the LORD.

The First Trial

13 One day, while his sons and daughters were
eating and drinking wine in the house of their el-
dest brother, 14 a messenger came to Job and said,
"The oxen were plowing and the donkeys grazing
beside them, 15 and the Sabeans carried them off in
a raid. They put the servants to the sword, and I
alone have escaped to tell you." 16 He was still
speaking when another came and said, "God's fire
has fallen from heaven and struck the sheep and
the servants and consumed them; I alone have
escaped to tell you." 17 He was still speaking when
another came and said, "The Chaldeans formed
three columns, seized the camels, carried them off,
and put the servants to the sword; I alone have
escaped to tell you." 18 He was still speaking when
another came and said, "Your sons and daughters
were eating and drinking wine in the house of their
eldest brother, 19 and suddenly a great wind came
from across the desert and smashed the four cor-
ners of the house. It fell upon the young people
and they are dead; I alone have escaped to tell you."

Job's Reaction

20 Then Job arose and tore his cloak and cut off
his hair. He fell to the ground and worshiped.
21 He said,

"Naked I came forth from my mother's womb,
and naked shall I go back there.
The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away;
blessed be the name of the LORD!"

22 In all this Job did not sin, nor did he charge
God with wrong.

continue

readers still question Job's innocence, God's authoritative boasting repeats the narrator's assessment of Job's innocence. Job is "blameless and upright, fearing God and avoiding evil" (1:8). The satan, however, suspects Job is faithful only because God has given him good things. He accuses God of purchasing Job's fidelity, for if God were to remove them, "surely [Job] will curse you to your face" (1:11). The Hebrew word translated "curse" means literally "to bless," but here "bless" is a euphemism, that is, a polite way to say the opposite.

Without hesitation and without debate, the Lord gives the satan control of Job's life with one caveat—he is not to touch Job. Why God acquiesces to this deal is not clear. It may be that refusing the satan's challenge would cause God shame in this ancient Israelite culture where honor is of high value. Or it may be that God is so confident of Job's loyalty that a positive outcome of the deal seems assured. Whatever God's reasons for abdicating power, the satan goes forth to loose tragedy upon Job.

1:13-22 Job's first test

Back on earth, catastrophes roll over Job in quick succession. In simple, unadorned prose, the story unfolds in parallel episodes so each disaster appears like the one before in a persistent drumbeat of loss. Events concerning Job's children form a literary frame around his other losses (1:13, 18-19). By setting the other disasters during one of their feasts, the text creates a foreboding sense of doom and foreshadows the fourth and most horrible of Job's devastations. A messenger comes to announce each tragedy and says, "I alone have escaped to tell you" (1:15, 16, 17, 18). And "He was still speaking when" the next messenger appears with a similar report. Finally, in the horrible climax, the narrator gives extra description to the children's destruction. A great wind destroys the house where they are feasting and kills all of them. Within a few verses, Job loses everything in a whirlwind of calamity, a blitz of overwhelmingly bad news.

To this point in the telling, Job has made no response to any of the reports, but then in customary rituals for expressing grief, he tears his clothes, cuts his hair, and falls upon the ground. At last he speaks in carefully balanced sentences typical of Hebrew poetry. "Naked I came forth . . . naked shall I go back . . . The LORD gave

. . . the LORD has taken away" (1:21). Then he blesses God's name. Job does not curse God and the narrator confirms that Job does not "sin, nor did he charge God with wrong" (1:22).

2:1-6 Another bad deal in heaven

The story might have ended in the previous chapter where, even in the aftermath of the unrelenting assault upon him, Job proved himself blameless and upright, a God-fearer, and a refuser of evil. Instead, when the heavenly messengers come before the Lord again, the tension escalates. The narrative follows the first heavenly scene of the previous chapter, but with some important changes. Again God asks the satan where he has been and if he has seen his "servant Job" who remains "blameless and upright, fearing God and avoiding evil" (2:3). In still a further affirmation of Job, God accuses the satan of manipulation in order to harm Job without cause.

The satan replies "skin for skin," a short saying that probably means, if you harm someone's skin, they will harm yours in turn. His principle of human behavior is that people may remain faithful when you take their things or their loved ones, but if you attack their bodies and threaten their lives, they will do anything. The satan applies his principle to Job, insisting that Job will "curse you to your face" (2:5). Again without explanation, God relinquishes Job into the satan's power. The only constraint on the satan is that he preserve Job's life.

CHAPTER 2

The Second Interview

[1]One day, when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, the satan also came with them. [2]The LORD said to the satan, "Where have you been?" Then the satan answered the LORD and said, "Roaming the earth and patrolling it." [3]The LORD said to the satan, "Have you noticed my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him, blameless and upright, fearing God and avoiding evil. He still holds fast to his innocence although you incited me against him to ruin him for nothing." [4]The satan answered the LORD and said, "Skin for skin! All that a man has he will give for his life. [5]But put forth your hand and touch his bone and his flesh. Then surely he will curse you to your face." [6]And the LORD said to the satan, "He is in your power; only spare his life."

continue



The first two chapters of Job are carefully structured in **five alternating scenes** that introduce the main characters and describe the onset of Job's suffering.

	Place	Characters	Content
Scene 1 (1:1-5)	Job's house	Job; his children	Job's wealth and goodness
Scene 2 (1:6-12)	God's court	God; the divine council ("sons of God") including the satan	God's boast; the satan's challenge; God's permission to afflict Job
Scene 3 (1:13-22)	Job's house	Job; his children and servants	Job's loss of family and property; his acceptance
Scene 4 (2:1-6)	God's court	God; the divine council; the satan	Renewal of God's boast and the satan's challenge; God's permission to destroy Job's health
Scene 5 (2:7-13)	Job's house	Job and his wife; his friends	Job's loss of health; his wife's challenge; his acceptance; the friends' sympathy