

Job as poetry

SCRIPTURE FOCUS

Select verses in Job

BUILDUP THEME



LEARN DOCTRINE

God gave us the book of Job to both humble us and give us sure hope in Him.

MEMORY VERSE

Psalm 42:7, 8

Just when our lives are humming along and we think we know God well, God teaches us deeper truths about His goodness and greatness. Job had an unbelievable opportunity to learn about God. God taught him the “Who” behind the “whys” and “why nots” of life. The book of Job is a record of Job’s humbled learning and growing hope.

1. When has God used troubles to teach you?

2. What did you learn?

God gave us the book of Job to help us when we face opportunities to deepen our trust in God. We will witness God’s humbling of

Job and Job's resultant hopefulness in God. This study of Job's account will transform your life, humbling you so you might build your hope in God. This first session will set up your study by explaining the book's structure and use of figures of speech.

BIBLE STUDY

The book of Job provides the thoughtful reader with a depth of understanding concerning the profound issues of human suffering. Job is a treasure, a gift from a loving God to those who love Him enough to seek deep and substantial wisdom that speaks to life's most perplexing questions regarding affliction.

The Purpose of the Book of Job

In general, the book of Job addresses the problem of human suffering; more particularly, the problem of suffering by the righteous person. The purpose of Job is to teach deep and profound lessons about God to those who hope and trust in Him. In so doing, Job also teaches important lessons on how believers are to respond to suffering.

Job is not a book for the faint of faith. It is not a "how to" on hard times in daily life. It does not present a series of steps to take to overcome life's downturns. (Other portions of Scripture provide help in these areas.) Job is a book for the strong of faith, or those who desire to be. It is a majestic presentation of God Almighty and the wonder of Who He is. To some extent, Job does not seek to answer the "why" questions of human suffering. It does, however, answer the "Who" question of human suffering for the careful reader and seeking believer.

3. What are some "why" questions of human suffering?

Job's Literary Style

Poetry is the language of the soul. It communicates feelings along with its message. Like a work of art that blends colors on a painter's canvas, a poet creatively arranges his words in verse form to present a vivid picture. Jonah provides a good example of communicating feelings as part of his message.

4. Read Jonah 2. What evidence in this passage suggests poems are the “language of the soul”?

Jonah isn't an exclusively poetic book. Neither is Genesis, which includes Jacob's poetic blessing of his sons (Gen. 49:2–27), nor Judges, which includes the Song of Deborah (Judg. 5). The books that are exclusively poetic, or nearly so, are Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, and Lamentations. Such poetic books display powerfully emotional language, yet each bears its own distinct style and purpose.

Job is a poetic narrative drama and Psalms a poetic hymnbook. Proverbs contains wise maxims while Ecclesiastes is a poetic discourse on the philosophy of life. Song of Solomon is a poetic love cantata and Lamentations includes poetic dirges lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem.

Hebrew poetry has three basic characteristics: meter, parallelism, and a rich use of figurative language. The writers incorporated these language tools under the Holy Spirit's guidance to present truth with emotion.

“Meter” refers to “a pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables, establishing a line of poetry.” The Hebrew language has meter in the stressed and unstressed syllables used by the writer. Linguists, though, don't agree on how to identify Hebrew meter. Any Hebrew meter is obviously lost in the English translations. We can, however, learn something of the Hebrew meter by observing the poetic structure.

Most English editions of the Bible display the structure of poetic verse by how they group verses or sections of verses. Translators knew how to group the verses and phrases by simply paying attention to the meaning. Meaning reveals Hebrew poetic structure.

5. Browse Job 38—41, looking for groups of verses or phrases that are obviously related. What connects the grouped phrases and verses you observed?

6. Read Job 38:39–41. What common point does God make through this group of verses?

Meter creates a general “feeling” or “atmosphere.” For example, the “qinah” meter, or dirge meter, expresses sadness. Other kinds of meter communicate other kinds of emotion, ranging from joy to the adventure-some note of epic discovery. The book of Job includes a wide variety of meters, thereby expressing a wide spectrum of human emotion.

7. What problems might arise if we read Job like any other book and thereby failed to read it as poetry?

Job’s Parallelism

There are six major kinds of parallelism. Each includes various numbers of lines to communicate ideas. The basic linear unit in Hebrew poetry is a “bicolon” or “couplet,” which is two lines of poetry, usually of similar length and style and with parallel or related ideas. A “monostich” is one line of poetry that stands alone. Three related lines working together make a “tricolon” and four a “quatrain.”

In **synonymous parallelism**, line two states essentially the same thought as line one. It may even use the same words and terms or similar words and terms. The speakers in Job use synonymous parallelism frequently.

8. Read Job 3:11; 38:26. How does the repetition of thought in these couplets impact you?

In **synthetic parallelism**, line two further develops the idea of line one. Line two either defines line one, proves it, applies it, or adds further information to it. Synthetic parallelism gives further explanation or information in a striking way. Synthetic parallelism is common in Job and other wisdom literature (e.g., Prov. 18:7).

9. Read Job 3:20; 5:17. How does line two in each couplet further develop the idea of line one?

In **antithetic parallelism**, line two of a couplet contrasts the idea of line one. Just as the whiteness of a pearl stands out sharply against a black velvet background, so an idea in antithetic parallelism stands out sharply against the background of its contrasting idea. Job 32:7 and 8 is an example of antithetic parallelism. Elihu contrasts the wisdom of man with the wisdom that is from God.

10. Read Job 41:10. The first line in the couplet refers to Leviathan, a terrible sea creature. How does the antithetic parallelism in this verse help the reader?

The speakers in Job didn't use antithetic parallelism as much as some of the others types of parallelism. Proverbs uses the parallelism far more frequently. Still, when we come across it, we should pause to take in the contrast and learn from it.

In **emblematic parallelism**, the writer states a truth in one line and gives a figure of speech that conveys that same truth in the other line. Psalm 23:1 is an example of emblematic parallelism. The figure of speech in the first line, the Lord as a shepherd, explains why David is sure all his needs will be met.

11. Read Job 9:25, 26. How does the emblematic parallelism help you understand what the speaker wants to communicate?

In emblematic parallelism, the figures of speech make abstract points more concrete. We should spend time on the figure, not to read too much into it, but to understand the truth more fully.

Formal parallelism does not bear any semantic relationship, but simply uses poetic structure (meter) to emphasize the point. The second line finishes the same thought began in the first line. Job 38:3

has formal parallelism. Read that verse and you will note that even in English, you can hear the poetic structure, or meter, in the couplet. But this couplet does not bear any of the other semantic features common to parallelism. Nor does Job 40:1 and 2, another example of formal parallelism.

Climactic parallelism usually requires at least a three-line stanza of poetry (tricolon) or a four-lined poem (quatrain). In climactic parallelism, all the lines of the stanza begin the same way except for the last line, which gives the climactic statement or grand conclusion. David used this pattern in Psalm 29:1 and 2. In some cases, as in Isaiah 40:31, the point is given first and then the three parallel lines. God effectively used climactic parallelism when He questioned Job in 38:36–38.

12. Read Job 12:14–25. There are two sets of climactic parallelisms in this passage (vv. 14–16 and 17–25). What are the key points they reveal?

When studying climactic parallelism, you should not read into the parallel statements so much that you ignore the main idea revealed in the climactic statement.

The message of the book of Job is greatly enhanced through poetry. Job, his wife, his friends, and even God braided their words together with strong emotions. Understanding the types of parallelism they all used allows you to capture their emotions and ponder their points.

Interpreting Figures of Speech

Old Testament poetry employs figures of speech. A figure of speech is a word or phrase used in unordinary ways to create intensity, feeling, or emphasis. Figures of speech broaden our understanding. The figures of speech in the book of Job give us important insights, but we need to know what they are and how to gain a greater understanding from them.

Job lived in an ancient culture with limited experiences and objects to use as the basis of his figures of speech. So he and the other speakers in the book often turned to nature to convey truths. Even God used figures from nature that Job would understand. Though

our understanding and encounters with nature are like Job's, there are differences we must take into account.

Note that some Bible versions replace figures of speech with what the translators believe were the authors' intended meanings. God, however, purposefully chose specific figures of speech to communicate specific truths. It is impossible to capture every nuance of a figure of speech by using a translator's plain language. We gain the most from a passage by studying its figures of speech.

Job's Figures of Speech

A **simile** is a comparison, stating that something is like something else. Similes normally use the words "like" or "as." The book of Job employs many similes to reveal truth or to communicate a speaker's thoughts or point of view.

13. Read Job 19:10. What information does Job's simile reveal?

Job's use of simile in 19:10 reveals his feelings and perspective. It gives us a window into his heart, but it doesn't reveal God's perspective. God knew Job wasn't like an uprooted tree. Job still had a secure hope for both the present and the future. Job even admitted later in the passage that his future was still secure. He anticipated seeing his Redeemer (19:25, 26); he just didn't have much hope in his immediate circumstances. Job's simile, then, helps us understand the hopelessness that can accompany tragedy and pain. It also teaches us that we must trust God rather than our feelings.

A **metaphor** is a comparison, stating that one thing represents another. Metaphors state something is something else.

14. Read Job 29:15. What does Job communicate about himself by calling himself "eyes" and "feet"?

Job also used metaphors to reveal what he is not. For instance, he said he is not a tree that has been cut down (14:7–10). Tree stumps can sprout again and return to strength. Job didn't have any hope

in restoration. As with his uprooted tree simile in 19:10, Job's tree stump metaphor reveals what he is thinking and his outlook on life in the face of such deep despair and pain.

A **merism** communicates one basic truth or idea by expressing two opposites or extremes. For example, someone might say, "I worried about you day and night." "Day and night" is a merism for every moment.

15. Read Job 38:19. What merism is found in this verse?

With merisms, we must consider the truth the two parts reveal as a pair. We shouldn't get hung up on one or the other. They find their meaning when used together.

Personification attributes the characteristics of personality to an inanimate object or to an idea.

16. Read Job 38:12. What does the personification of the dawn reveal to Job about God's greatness?

The sun regularly rises and sets because God is both powerful and good. God's personification of the dawn revealed His goodness to Job, who counted on the sun to grow his crops, feed his family, and provide for his needs.

Job isn't a book that can be read or studied on the fly. There is more in the book than this course could possibly cover. Commit to reading the book thoughtfully. Pause to ponder God's use of parallelism and figurative language. And praise Him for being so thoughtful in communicating truth to both our hearts and minds.

SESSION APPLICATION

17. When have you gained from reading Bible poetry as poetry?

18. What do you expect to gain from reading Job as poetry?

Linger over Job as you would a fine meal and be nourished by the knowledge of God to be gained from the study. Job is meant to be pondered, not run through.

19. How might you linger over Job?

20. Pray that God would use the book of Job to humble you and to grow your trust and hope in Him.