Job? Really Dave?! Why are you doing this to us? Let’s just stay with the texts that are, well, a bit more familiar and interesting. I mean, who really wants to dig into the suffering of Job and these deep waters of ‘why.’ I get that!

It would be easier to stay on more familiar ground, to avoid the risks associated with what is undoubtedly one of the more difficult books of the Bible. But the Poetical Books are up for rotation in the lectionary, so there is a sense of necessity – as Paul once …for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27).

Job and Ecclesiastes, of all the books in the Bible are the two that ***undermine*** our complacency and deconstruct our pat answers for theological problems. You should consider these books among those that dwell in the grey areas between the black and white. We rejoice in them because the Bible is so real with us as to include Job and Ecclesiastes and because life isn’t black and white, it’s complicated.

The gains in maturity and understanding will be worth whatever risks are involved.

**Behind the Text**

Job is the first of the Poetical Books, or The Writings: Job, Psalms, Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, Song of Solomon. You’ll notice that they are grouped together in your Bible. You’ll also notice that if you leaf through them they are mostly in verse form, not prose. This is important to understand because genre drives reading strategy.

I encourage you to check out the video on Job page our website (vicnazarene.ca) for a thumbnail sketch of the structure of the book. Really a great summary of the content and structure of the book.

We are doing what we call “rereading” and that is an important word. It implies a special relationship with an ancient story. It is just a dusty old text… 2500-3000 years old…***until*** it comes alive in the imagination of a modern reader.

And since Job is one of those books which doesn’t really present definitive answers to life’s biggest questions, but rather summons the reader to contemplate a range of ideas. That means the power of the book resides in your reflections as you reread it and how you allow the book to speak to you ***where you are***. If you approach the book with the right attitude you can’t ‘get it wrong’ or fail to be edified by it.

By way of a start, you have heard me say many times that resurrection is the foundational principle of the New Testament. We also can say that creation and the covenant are the two most foundational principles of the Old Testament. Creation, covenant, resurrection,

But underlying all of that is the fundamental notion of “theism”: that ***God is***. We are “theists.” The basic idea is that God exists and is active in the world as its creator. [[1]](#endnote-1)

He is, for us a God who is a creator, covenant maker and God of resurrection, and that he does so as a person. We Christians believe he does so in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is Christian theism, the bedrock of our belief upon which all else rests.

While the rest of the Bible assumes theism, Job is different in that this story is about theism and the difficulties of being a theist. It asserts that God is and then goes on to explore how problematic this notion is to those who live with this belief. Especially if you suffer and if the world seems unjust. The book is quite unique. It is a treasure in the canon.

And maybe… just maybe… Job is the first book new Christians should study.

What can this book can teach us about life, the nature of God and human nature? What can we expect from this study?

The key to reading this book is to accept that is doesn’t really offer direct answers to the difficult questions that it raises. We aren’t going to learn why we suffer. We aren’t going to solve the problem of evil

What **are** we going to learn?

* We are going to learn to be honest about the doubts and difficulties which attend to being a theist – the problems of evil and suffering in the world being at the top of that list
* We are going to explore the basis for our theism, i.e. that we are theists because of the testimony of Scripture, reason, tradition and experience. All of these things play into the narrative of the arguments raised in the book.
* We are going to reflect on how moral responsibility is born of our God-given ***free will***.
* We are going to learn that our perception of what is going in heaven is highly imperfect.
* We are going to learn that selflessness is the highest expression of moral and spiritual life.

A brief note on genre. As I say, genre drives reading strategy.[[2]](#endnote-2) Is this history or is it a story? How you answer that will be determinative for the types of question you raise.

We note that Job is mostly poetry not prose, and that we should read it as such. Full disclosure, I believe it to be a story with a moral about how we ought to live, rather than a treatise with an historical, theological or doctrinal purpose.

We have to slow down, be more meditative, and look for meaning in the words beyond the surface, poetry is in its nature less clear, black and white, which is the power of the poetry genre.[[3]](#endnote-3)

**In the Text**

Let’s look at the characters in this story as we find them in chapters 1 and 2.

We begin with the narrator, who, as narrators often are, is omniscient. The teller of the story sees all of heaven and earth. And one of the most important things the narrator does is, at the outset, reveals to the readers that Job is, in fact, righteous. God says, There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil (Job 1:8). The whole story is built on the fact that Job’s interlocutors don’t know what we as readers are privileged to know. They think he is a sinner. But we know better. This is one of the engines of conflict that drives the story.

The character of Job is presented as a pious man of the Ancient Near East. [[4]](#endnote-4) We aren’t told, but he doesn’t seem to be a Jew. Let’s call him one of the pious pagans of the Bible. He was very rich and …he was the greatest of all the people of the east (Job 1:3).

When Job has lost his family and belongings by the end of chapter one, yet persists in his integrity (Job 2:3b).

The name Job comes from the Hebrew meaning “persecuted one, hated one” (ayyabh).

His character is, by turns, fiercely loyal to God, but then righteous indignation at his friends and God, then to despair, anger, resignation (chapter 28). He exemplifies the range of human emotions we can feel when we suffer.

The character of God is a fairly remote, not particularly feeling or attractive portrait of the Divine. God is fair but dispassionate about Job’s suffering. SaysJob, ***I cry to you and you do not answer me; I stand, and you merely look at me*** (30:20). This is a feature of the story world of Job, it isn’t a doctrinal statement about the nature of God.

He is concerned with the nature of true piety and justice. He is only present on the scene in the first two chapters and the last five chapters, 38-42. He is a remote figure in the story.

There is the character of the heavenly council (notice the formulaic repetition of the council scene at the beginning of both chapter one and chapter two). This sets the scene in heaven in an analogy of an ancient royal court. It is not intended to teach that this is how heaven is actually structured.

There are Jobs friends, those whose comments are based on a belief that a theology of retribution and reward is the infallible mechanism of God’s interaction with the world, and who give advice based on the misapprehension that Job is actually a sinner.

And there is the most interesting and entertaining character of all, the satan, a member of the heavenly council [[5]](#endnote-5)

This satan (to use the Hebrew pronunciation) isn’t the sort of personal devil that is associated with the name Satan in the New Testament.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Here, think of his role in the drama as “disturber,” or accuser, or I like court jester. Court jesters were actually held in high esteem in medieval courts because they had the power tease and speak truth in to the royal court. The jester could mock and tease the king without getting beheaded.[[7]](#endnote-7) This court satan, like a court jester is astute, mischievous and he makes a good point.

‘Sure’ ha satan says, ‘if the righteous prosper then people are going to do what you say because it rewards them (see Job 1:9ff). ‘That isn’t true worship’ he says. ‘It’s a transaction. There is no moral credit for a self-interested action.”[[8]](#endnote-8)

To which God says, ‘Do whatever you want with Job but don’t hurt him.’

The satan’s point is Does Job serve God for nothing? Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? (Job 1:10)

Now you do not, do not want to become the pawn in a wager in the heavenly council!! Can you imagine if the Lord said to ha satan just check out Pastor Dave for someone who is truly pious… on second thought better go with Pastor Calvin… you know what… let’s go with Sylvia, or I’m sure Pastor Jimmy will shine.

Faith that is based on self-interest is not genuine, it is not true loyalty to God, nor is it true worship of God. True faith, he contends indirectly, is disinterested piety. It is based on true selflessness. What makes his point powerful is that he is right.

Now let me cut right to the chase about what this scene represents and then we will go to our guest for some conversation about application so far.

Job doesn’t know what is going on in the heavenly council. Job’s friends don’t know God either. They assume a mechanistic pattern to God’s interaction with the world. There is a gap between what Job and his friends know and what heaven knows. This is the basic problem that the book struggles with. It is all about the gap. Especially as it concerns why we suffer and whether or not God is just in his governance of the world.

From the Text – A Chat with Pastor Gary

1. As the former pastor here you spent three decades in pastoral ministry. Needless to say you are a respected practitioner. I’ve been saying today that Job is about the gap between what Job and his friends know and what God knows. What has it been like helping people navigate the gap through your years of ministry?
2. What don’t we know about the divine will, and what do we know?
3. What can you share with us that helps us navigate the gap?
4. Tremper Longman has said “A [proper] theology of suffering is less interested in helping us cope and more interested in leading us to care.”
1. If you are a Jew, a Christian or a Muslim you are a theist. We just disagree on who the premier religious figures in history. If you are a Hindu you are a polytheist. If you are a Taoist you are more of a deist. If you are a Buddhist there an absence of the notion of God. Buddha was not a theist. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For example, consider the reading strategy you use for news feeds, or a dictionary, a textbook or a novel. In each instance you use a reading strategy attuned to the genre. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. As Proverbs says, … make your ear attentive to wisdom and incline your heart to understanding… for the Lord gives wisdom and in so doing we will guard the paths of justice and preserve the way of his faithful ones. (Prov 2:2, 5, 8) [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. He is from Uz, a place we know not from history and there is no date or political setting. John Rogerson in *The Atlas of the Bible,* the best atlas I know, has no mention of Uz as an historical site. There are only two other brief reference to Job in the Bible, Ezekiel 14:14-20; and James 5:11, which refers to the “patience of Job.” Both one-liners. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. (here is Ps 89:5-8, perhaps the only other place the heavenly council if found …Who among the heavenly beings is like the Lord, a God feared in the council of the holy ones, great and awesome above all that are around him. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. In the Hebrew test the satan is presented as an office or a role, not a proper name, it has the definite article - the satan, it is not a proper name (in spite of its capitalization in English translations). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. He isn’t so much a malevolent figure. He isn’t trying to pull heaven apart, there is never any danger presented to God’s reign, a similarity with Jesus being tested in the desert. But this satan is astute and mischievous. Ha satan is more like an ancient near easter Stephen Colbert than the Devil, let’s say. Late night hosts are funny because they speak truth to power in an amusing way. But there is always truth in the jibe. That what makes it funny. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. The heart of the book? “…the satan is questioning the validity of a moral order in which the pious unfailingly prosper. The test of true righteousness would be worship without the promise of reward” (HRJ p. 53).

Also think here of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, where the satan plays a very similar role in challenging the piety of Jesus. He tests Jesus’ loyalty to God, ‘just turn this stone into bread… it’s not a big deal.’ Jesus’ piety is, in fact, disinterested in self and showing true loyalty to God. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)