

# **Why Does Job Repent?**

*Ronnie Davis*

*Cape Town Baptist Seminary*

## **ABSTRACT**

In the book of Job, the main character is declared a righteous man by both God and Job's peers. Throughout the book, Job's innocence is maintained and ultimately he is vindicated by God. It is a puzzle, then, to find an impassioned cry of repentance in the final chapter (42:1-6). This article investigates the nature of Job's repentance by considering the context, content and consequences of that action. In examining the context, Job's encounter with God is of primary focus. The content is, then, examined exegetically to unpack the central meaning. Finally, the results of Job's actions as revealed in the final narrative are considered so as to highlight the value of Job's response to God.

## **1. Introduction**

*In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil. (Job 1:1)*

With this verse, the reader is introduced to Job. One finds that Job has material wealth that reflects the outpouring of God's blessing—expected for someone who is so devout in his service to God.<sup>1</sup> He is truly one of the wealthiest men of his time, prompting the declaration: "He was the greatest man among all the people of the East" (1:3). Less one think this assessment of Job's character is a hyperbolic statement by the author, one finds that God makes this same declaration to Satan in 1:8 and in 2:3. Throughout this incredible book, one is left with the certainty of Job's 'rightness' in his circumstances. Not only does God clearly state that Job's calamity is not connected to a moral lapse (2:3b), but Job also reiterates the conviction of his righteousness despite the assumed evidence of sin—the suffering which befalls him. It is a puzzle, then, when one arrives at the final chapter and

hears the last statement Job utters in the book: “...*Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes*” (42:6). What has happened that leads this blameless and upright man to such an impassioned statement of repentance? In what circumstance does the upright need to repent? From what action has Job repented? Such questions are of importance to the earnest disciple. In order to answer them, one must consider the catalyst of Job’s emphatic statement in the larger context, the meaning in the content of his statement and the significance of his response for himself and the modern reader.

## **2. Catalyst for Job’s Repentance**

Through three cycles of speeches with his friends, Job maintains his righteousness. He does not waiver from the certainty of his blamelessness for the condition in which he finds himself. As the cycles of speeches progress, he becomes more adamant that God alone can bring answers to the dilemma of the sudden change in fortune<sup>2</sup>. He is so set in his conviction that God alone can provide any satisfactory answers that he tries to dismiss his friends from any further comments<sup>3</sup>. When faced with the suggestion that no one can stand before God and live, Job is unfazed. He, then, asserts that a mediator must exist who can present his case before God—first, in the form of a true witness/advocate (16:18ff), then in the form of a kinsman/redeemer (19:23ff). Finally, he boldly ‘demands’ an answer from God using court language in which one must write out an indictment of offense (31:35-37).

Job finds, however, that his encounter with God is not as he anticipated it to be. The content of the speeches of God in chapters 39-41 seem to have little to do with the situation at hand—Job’s suffering. If one has wisdom—as anticipated by Job, himself, in his discourse on wisdom (28:1-28), one realizes that they have everything to do with Job’s questions. This suggestion is realised in Job’s final response.

In the two speeches, God reveals some specific truths. First, he is the majestic one. Not only the author of all creation, but the one who sustains all life. Further, God has intimate knowledge of all life. Second, Job is human in his understanding—without knowledge of even the ‘basics’ of creation. It is the juxtaposition of these two truths that moves Job to his declaration of repentance.

### **3. Content of Job’s Repentance**

While Job’s statement of repentance is voiced in verse 6, the five verses that precede the declaration provide insight to the progression of Job’s thoughts following God’s self-revelation. In this progression, one begins to grasp the nature and depth of Job’s repentance. One hears his foundational declaration both in the manner which God has challenged Job and the ‘newness’ of Job’s understanding of God.

Job begins his reply to God with a re-affirmation of his foundational belief in the sovereignty of God. This declaration highlights two areas of God’s omnipotence: in his abilities and in his designs. Both have been renewed in God’s declarations of his power over creation in the two speeches of 38:1-39:30 and 40:1-41:34 as Job is given a glimpse of the majesty of God. Job’s conviction of God’s ability to “do all things” has been affirmed as God revealed his activity in not only establishing the foundations of creation, but also in God’s power over the great mysteries of creation—from the heavens to the great beasts, Leviathan and Behemoth. This conviction of God’s power has been evident in Job’s language throughout the book.<sup>4</sup> All the more—after the speeches, he knows that the God he serves is the God who is able. More than one who is able, however, Job is convinced God is the God who has plans. This second affirmation has also been confirmed in the two speeches as God revealed not only his hand in the details of creation but also his intimate understanding of their workings—from weather patterns to life cycles of animals. The

combination of God's ability and design meet in the conviction that "no plan of yours can be thwarted." This absolute has been at the heart of Job's dilemma<sup>5</sup> and has been consolidated to an immutable conviction following God's self-revelation.

The central portion of Job's response centres on God's direct challenge to Job made in the two speeches. One notes this relationship in Job's repetition of God's introductory statements to him in verses 3 and 4 of chapter 42. In the first reference, Job reveals the heart of God's challenge: Job's humanity. One of the consequences of Job's glimpse of the majestic God is the realisation that Job, himself, is not God. He does not have the divine perspective on even his own life. The scope of God's understanding as revealed in his role in creation has led Job to confess the limits of his own knowledge. The sequence of action illustrated here—the revelation of God's majesty followed by the realisation of one's humanity—is found elsewhere in scripture in such servants of God as Moses, David, and Isaiah. As a result, the absurdity of Job's demand for God's appearance before him as one initiating court proceedings has been realised by Job. He admits not only the limitations of his understanding, but also declares the wonder of God's working—even when God is 'hidden' from our sight. Job declares that God has moved in wondrous ways even if his own circumstances did not make that readily evident. At no time, is God inactive.

The second reference introduces Job's renewed statement of faith. God's directive to "listen, and I will speak" followed by the declaration "I will question you" leads to a newness of faith for Job. Job expresses the development of his own faith in terms of one's progression from hearing to seeing. At no point does Job renounce his former understanding—indeed, he has already affirmed the foundational belief; rather, he has grown in the depth of his convictions. It is the deepening of their relationship as from knowledge by learning to an understanding by experience. He had previously experienced the activity of God, as evidenced in his statements consciously attributing his blessings to the actions of God (i.e.,

1:20-21), but now he had encountered God in a more complete manner. He had moved toward God based upon his understanding, but now was able respond to God in light of his new encounter.

The depth of his new understanding of God provokes an act of repentance in Job. Not for any actions that led to his punishment (as suggested by his friends and Elihu), but because he had limited God in his own understanding. He had not really come to an acknowledgment of the fullness of God's majesty. He had acted and moved based upon a paradigm of his own creation, but now desires to move based upon God's own revelation. His repentance is for the assumption that he had fully understood how God must act and respond in the case of his suffering. The great irony of Job is that he never hears an answer to the question that prompted him to seek God—some word of vindication of his righteousness in his circumstance. Instead, he receives an answer to the question he didn't even know he needed to ask: how great is his God? He thought he had understood, but realised that he had limited God in his own patterns of thinking—much as his friends had done.

#### **4. Consequences of Job's Repentance**

Job's act of repentance is not the end of the book. It is, rather, a beginning of Job's latter years which God "blessed more than the first". One finds in the final narrative (42:7-17) an assessment of Job that parallels the opening narrative. This parallel, however, exceeds the first description. The "upright and blameless" man who was the greatest "among all the people of the East" became even greater, both in righteousness and wealth! Whereas Job acted as mediator and intercessor for his children in the early chapters (1:5), he is now the priestly intercessor for his friends (42:7-9). His wealth is doubled (1:3 and 42:12). His children are replaced in number and exceeded in prominence through the beauty of his daughters (42:15). Most significantly for Job, he is vindicated in the eyes of those around

him (42:11) through the activity of God (42:10). The length of years and breath of progeny bear witness to both his continued faithfulness and God's hand upon his life so that he dies "old and full of years" (42:17). These statements of God's blessings on Job push the hearer to realise that in the course of Job's experience, he has moved to new heights in his "uprightness" and "blamelessness".

For Job, the self-revelation of God became a transformative moment. Job was pushed to greater depth in his own righteousness as he was moved beyond the limitations of forms of righteous behaviour and stretched to see the meaning of 'rightness' in relation to God. True joy is found not in understanding how God acts, but in knowing God. Similarly, true wisdom is not in the ability to explain the activity of God, but in perceiving God in His revelation of Himself so that one might truly 'fear' God (i.e., 28:28).

## **5. Conclusion**

Having examined the catalyst, content and consequences of Job's repentance, one can come to an understanding of the significance of Job's repentance. In this case, repentance is not about an activity of sin, but a lack of understanding of God. As Job moves to a greater realisation of God, his life is transformed—even though he was already 'upright and blameless'.

For the modern disciple, therefore, the book of Job is not so much an answer to the problem of suffering and evil; rather, it is a declaration of righteousness as seen in the life of Job. As Job was challenged to move beyond his limited perspective of God—even though he acted righteously in his limited knowledge, the modern disciple is called to evaluate the forms and limitations placed upon God by the follower. In so many ways, one can create forms to express an understanding of God, an expression of worship, or definitions of righteousness that one can miss the meaning of who God is. God is never fully encapsulated

by any human thought or theology, never restricted to a particular form or mode of worship, nor comprehensively served in a singular expression of discipleship. God is not the God of abstract principal alone, but the great I Am who encounters, seeks, and saves. The modern disciple must take heed to the message of Job. Contentment is not to be found simply in striving to be “upright and blameless”—though that is never seen as bad—but in seeking the transformative encounter with God. The question of “why” is never as significant as the revelation of “who”.

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<sup>1</sup>This cause and effect theology (one is blessed when devout and cursed when a sinner) is the source of most of the tension between Job and his friends in the book.

<sup>2</sup>See 7:1-21; 9:25-10:22; 12:13ff.

<sup>3</sup>Most notably in the second cycle of speeches, see 16:1ff—he even calls them ‘miserable comforters’; 19:1ff—he refers to their advice as “torment”, “crushing him with words”; and 21:34—“how can you console me with your nonsense?”

<sup>4</sup>See 1:21; 2:10; 9:1ff; 12:13-25; 21:22ff.

<sup>5</sup>He often waivers on his desire to have an answer from God and the realisation of the futility of confronting God as no one can stand before Him. See 12:13ff; 19; 21:22ff; 23:13-17; 30:20ff.