



Thank you for your interest in On the Ash Heap—a six-week study of the book of Job.

The pages which follow include:

- An overview of this series (5 pages)
- A sample sermon/class outline (6 pages)
- A sample handout (4 pages)

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Life on the Ash Heap

Reflections on the Book of Job

This six week series on the book of Job works through one of the most demanding and difficult books in the Old Testament. The book itself is mostly poetry, which is harder for most of us to preach than history or narrative. And the questions it raises! What is the nature of faith? Why do bad things happen to good people? Where is God when things go wrong? Why does God allow Satan such a free hand in the affairs of men?

Although the material poses difficult questions, they are questions many of your members struggle with. They will respond hungrily to a series that dares to explore the darker side of faith and looks honestly at the very real problem of pain. Do you have anyone in your church that has struggled with cancer—their own or someone close to them? They will benefit from this series. Anyone in your church faced divorce, bankruptcy, kids gone wrong? They will appreciate thinking through this material.

One of my great concerns is the manner in which the hard edges of life are being treated in popular religion and by ill-equipped ministers. The shallow and cliché-ridden theology being trumpeted for truth today (health and wealth, positive thinking, much of what is said about prayer) puts people of faith in a real dilemma. If God wants us to be well and rich, why am I sick and poor? If faith means always thinking positively, why am I angry with God? If prayer is always effective, if I can 'name it and claim it,' why does God seem not to hear my requests? Am I being punished? Do I not have enough faith?

Such theological rubbish runs onto the rocks of Jesus' experience in the Garden ("Please?" "No."), Paul's struggle ("Remove this thorn!" "My grace is sufficient."), and, certainly, Job's suffering. Good people, people of faith and righteousness, committed and dedicated disciples, do suffer and sicken and die. They lose marriages and businesses and children. Faith is not a talisman that wards off all evil. If it were, everyone would go to church.

So if the clichés are wrong, what do we tell people in the midst of crisis and suffering? We tell them the story of Job. We allow them to bring to God their confusion and anger. We try to avoid the pitfalls of Job's friends. We allow for the possibility that life and faith might be more complicated, more difficult, than we would prefer.

Tim Woodroof
February, 2000

Bibliography for Job

I found the following books very helpful in my study of and preparation for this series on Job. You might want to add these books to your library.

- Brueggemann, Walter. Finally Comes the Poet. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. 1989. Though not a book on Job per se (this is a great book on preaching), Brueggemann says some very insightful things about Job's conversation with God (see pgs. 60ff) . . . and Israel's conversation in general. Wonderful, encouraging book.
- Frost, Gerhard. The Color of the Night. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House. 1977. A series of reflections on Job that will provide helpful insights and illustrations for your preaching.
- Glatzer, Nahum (Ed.). The Dimensions of Job. New York: Schocken Books. 1969. A collection of articles on Job written from various perspectives: Jewish, Christian, Humanist. Interesting and insightful dialogue.
- Hicks, John Mark. Yet Will I Hope in Him. Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Company. 1999. This book, written by a scholar who has experienced true suffering in his life, is about the wider question of suffering and God and prayer. The sixth chapter deals with Job particularly. Good stuff throughout.
- Janzen, J. Gerald. Job: Interpretation Bible Commentary Series. Atlanta: John Knox Press. 1985. A good, basic, understandable commentary on Job. Helpful for questions without being pedantic or arcane.
- Lewis, C.S. The Problem of Pain. New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc. 1962. (Available from many publishers and editions.) An old classic that should be in the library (and mind) of every preacher. Lewis writes wonderfully, of course, and thoughtfully. It is interesting to compare this more logical, technical treatment of the subject with his later work *A Grief Observed* after Lewis lost his wife and approached the problem of pain in a much more personal and intimate way.
- Mitchell, Stephen. The Book of Job. New York: HarperPerennial. 1992. This thoughtful, poetic translation of Job is well worth the money if only for Mitchell's introductory comments. But the translation itself is moving, carefully crafted, and properly disturbing.
- Peterson, Eugene. Job: The Message. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress. 1996. An excellent, colloquial translation of Job. Peterson makes Job come to life. He puts snap into the poetry. I have used this translation throughout this series, both in preaching and in the handouts.
- Terrien, Samuel. The Iconography of Job through the Centuries. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press. 1996. This may seem an odd (and expensive) recommendation. Terrien has written numerous books on Job. This book traces the way in which Job has been

interpreted by artists through the centuries. A unique and informative work.

Wilcox, John. The Bitterness of Job. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press. 1994. One of the best books I've read on Job. Not always easy reading, but always rewarding. Careful readers will appreciate Wilcox's treatment of the "orthodox" treatment of suffering and evil, and the way in which Job's bitter experience contradicts that orthodoxy.

Yancey, Philip. Where is God When It Hurts. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. 1977. This little book makes a good introduction to the problem of pain—and provides some wonderful quotes for your sermons. Excellent background reading.

Sermon Summaries

These lessons on Job are not strictly expository. I do not deal, verse by verse, with the great passages of this book. But neither are they simply topical—pick a subject and find some Scriptures that seem to fit. I would call these lessons "thematic." They are based on a broad understanding of Job (the big picture) and are rooted in texts found in Job.

I have included two forms of support for your preaching. The first is a weekly handout for your congregation, which is closely tied to the sermon outlines. Any changes you might make to the sermons may require you to make changes to the handouts as well. Be alert to this as you adapt this material to your own style.

Then there are the sermon outlines themselves. Each outline is 4 - 6 pages in length—a lot of information! I tend, however, to speak quickly and for about 30 minutes. You may want to use these outlines verbatim, modify them to your own style and situation, or throw them out entirely. I hope they can at least serve as a starting point for your own preparation.

Sermon Title	Text	Page #s Outline	Page #s Handout
<p>1. A Simple Faith?</p> <p>In contrast to the theological pabulum being offered in many churches today—spiritual junk food that tastes good going down but has no nutritional value whatsoever—Job offers good, solid, meaty fare. This book provides us with something to chew on—maybe even choke on. Life can be hard and unfair. What does faith say about such things? Job dares to address such issues. It talks about the place of suffering in the life of the righteous. It preaches that, though God will not always protect you from pain, he will be with you in your pain.</p>	<p>Job 9:21-22</p>	<p>1-6</p>	<p>1-4</p>
<p>2. The Facts of Life</p> <p>We live most of our lives (at least the successful and comfortable parts) under a faulty set of rules. “You get what you deserve.” “God guarantees that the righteous will prosper and the wicked will stumble.” “Pain is God’s punishment for sin. Blessing is his reward for goodness.” It is Job’s friends who are the champions for this view of life . . . who beat Job mercilessly with their rules. Job used to think as they do, before his own trials came. Now he realizes that the rules he learned do not always apply. Sometimes you don’t get what you deserve. Sometimes what you reap is not what you’ve sown. Not all suffering is punishment. And not all blessing is reward. Unsettling rules. But much closer to the truth.</p>	<p>Job 27:5-6</p>	<p>7-12</p>	<p>5-8</p>
<p>3. Life on the Ash Heap</p> <p>Where is God when we hurt? No place seems lonelier, more apart from God, than the ash heap. Suffering is a far cry from the bliss of heaven. Pain is a long way from the joy of paradise. Or is it? Imagine a God who addresses the problem of pain not by protecting us from it but by participating in it with us! Imagine a God who is willing to sit on the ash heap by our side and bleed along with us in our suffering!</p>	<p>Job 6:2-3</p>	<p>13-18</p>	<p>9-12</p>
<p>4. With Friends like These</p> <p>We need friends in times of suffering—especially in times of sufferings. But the sort of friend who knows how to comfort is hard to find. Job’s friends are prime examples of people who—though well-intentioned—do more harm than good. Though they seem to be talking to Job, they are really talking to protect themselves, to ward off the possibility they could suffer as he does. The ash heap demands a certain kind of friend—one who will comfort, one who will speak truth, one who will pray. Jesus Christ is exactly that kind of friend in our hard times. It is one of the most comforting thoughts in the Christian faith.</p>	<p>Job 16:2-5</p>	<p>19-22</p>	<p>13-16</p>

5. Hard, Hard Words

Job 7:11

23-28

17-20

What kinds of words does God permit us to use with him? Is the only language he will allow the language of praise and love? Or is God willing to hear words with an edge? Words that express grievance and anger? Faithful conversation doesn't have to be polite. God is big enough to take our hard words and use them to deepen our faith in him. Job knew this. His friends did not.

6. Out of the Whirlwind

Job 38:17-21

29-32

21-24

On the ash heap, we think what we want of God is explanation and rescue. We imagine that he will come and speak and all will make sense. God knows better. Oh, he comes to us as such times. And he does speak. But he offers no explanations, no reasons, no neat system of cause and effect. What he offers is himself. What he says is that he is God and we are not. He invites us to trust him, to enter into a deeper and more intimate relationship than we have known before. And, oddly, we find that is enough. We find it is exactly what we need.

A Simple Faith?

Move One: Two Stories

Story One: The worst day in the lives of Rodney & Elizabeth Alexander.

One weekend, Rodney took the kids to go swimming.

- As he had done so many times before, he dressed them in swimming togs, packed their water toys in the car, and hauled them all to the pool.
- The kids scattered, jumping into various places in the pool, laughing & screaming with all the other mass of children.
- Just another Saturday ... just another outing to the pool ... just another instance of a father showing his children a good time.
- Only *this* Saturday was different.

Hadden, the 3 year old, stepped off into water that was over his head.

- He sank to the bottom. Water filled his lungs. He lost consciousness.
- When he was discovered, no one knew how long he'd been in the water.
- A nurse, who happened to be at the scene, drained the water from Hadden's tiny lungs and began resuscitation.
- Rodney looked on helpless and terrified. He looked ... and prayed.

Hadden's eyes flickered open. He coughed & sputtered. He cried.

- Never in all Rodney's life was there a more welcome & joyous sound.
- They rushed Hadden to the hospital where he was pronounced healthy.
- They kept him overnight for observation. Hadden had a great time. Soon after his release, he asked his mother when he could go back.

The Sunday after the accident, Rodney was in church—grateful to God for saving his son. He came forward. An elder prayed over him. And—as a family of faith—the church confessed with Rodney that God is good. He is good, isn't he!

Story Two: Another Christian couple with another “worst day” story.

- Their 2 year old son toddled into a neighbor's yard and fell into a pool.
- When Chad was discovered, no one knew how long he'd been under.
- They resuscitated him. His eyes flickered open. He coughed & cried.
- But Chad had been in the water too long ... just a few extra moments ... just long enough to spare his life but to leave him badly brain damaged.
- He never learned to talk. He never got out of diapers. For 5 years he demanded constant, round the clock, attention and care.
- And then finally, perhaps mercifully, he died.

So tell me ... is God still good? Was he good to Hadden but not to Chad? Were parents more righteous than Chad's? More deserving of mercy?

Move Two: Shallow Theology

You hear it from pulpits, in Bible classes, and especially on Christian Radio & TV. You read it in best-selling books by Christian authors. You hear it mouthed by well-meaning friends at times of crisis.

- Spiritual pabulum.
- Platitudes dressed up as profundities.
- Easy answers for hard questions.
- Clichés – when what you need is a life-line.

The Health & Wealth Heresy

We are told, for instance, that it is God's will for all faithful Christians to be healthy & wealthy.

1. Lots of money is a sign of God's blessing. Lack of money is a sign of his displeasure.
2. Christians who have enough faith don't get sick. If they do get sick, they get healed.
 - I remember the pastor of a church in Nebraska who preached this message with great fervor.
 - When his own wife developed breast cancer, her life was minutely examined to discover the sin that had caused this disease.
 - When prayers for healing did not bring the expected results, she was privately and publicly reprimanded for her lack of faith.
 - And when she had the bad manners to actually die of her disease, her husband refused to preach the funeral.

What theological rot! And how a steady diet of it destroys our ability to live faithfully. We of course don't hold with such nonsense. No, we have nonsense of our own.

The "Good things happen to good people" fallacy (and its corollary)

1. Godly parents don't have reprobate children. And if your children do go wrong, it's not long before we come looking for some flaw in you to pin blame on.
2. Godly people don't have bad marriages. If your marriage is difficult or ends in divorce, that's all the evidence some of us need to pronounce you "not good."
3. Godly people don't have mental problems. They don't lose businesses. They don't have enemies. Their houses don't burn down. Their children don't have terrible accidents.
4. Good things happen to good people. And if good things aren't happening to

Move Three: There is a raging triumphalism in the American church today

1. It has us too busy talking about “victory” and “overcoming” and spiritual “success” to be bothered with the difficulties and complexities of life.
2. It has us so focused on “binding Satan” and “claiming promises” we have little time left to talk seriously about suffering and pain and heartbreaking disappointments.
 - We’re not sure such things really belong in any theology worth its salt.
 - Isn’t faith supposed to protect us from all that?

In our eagerness to get to the resurrection, we run right past the cross.

1. We’d far rather pitch our tents outside the empty tomb and hear testimonials about healing and prosperity and faithful children.
2. Calvary is no place for self-respecting Christians to stay. It’s too messy, too ugly, too fraught with hard questions and puzzling quandaries.
3. We want a happy faith, a simple faith, a reassuring faith. And we will trim our faith to suit our overwhelming need to be comfortable.

Move Four: All of which, of course, results in a kind of schizophrenic faith.

As individuals, we know only too well that life is full of suffering.

1. We have people sitting in this auditorium this morning:
 - Suffering from all manner of disease and health issues.
 - People who had much and lost it all. People who never had much to begin with.
 - People who have buried children and spouses and best friends.
 - People who have seen their marriages die.
 - People who have been lied about and slandered and abused.
 - People who have been raped and stolen from and beaten.
2. We could go on, listing the suffering represented just in this room.
3. But the point remains—As individuals, we know about suffering.

But as a group, we have no framework to help us understand suffering...or the all-powerful, loving, merciful God who looks on as we suffer.

1. Is God good or is he not?
2. Is God all-powerful or is he not?
3. If God is good and all powerful, then why doesn't he act to prevent so many of the tragedies which scar this life?
4. And why doesn't he – at least – protect the people who love him and worship him and give their lives to serve and honor him from those tragedies?

Such questions worry us. They make us terribly uncomfortable. We don't know what to do with them. So we mouth more platitudes. We recite more cliches. And we quickly change the subject to something more positive.

And the result? The result is that:

1. People who divorce find themselves out of place in a church that only has room for marital bliss. They quietly drop out.
2. A child dies and a father loses his faith.
3. A man goes bankrupt and sits on the back pew wondering which sin he is being punished for.
4. A woman learns she has a terminal disease and we don't know what to say to her or how to help her deal with her anger towards God.

The faith that should be our *rock* during times of struggle and pain becomes a *cudgel*. Far from easing our pain on the ash heap, it adds to our suffering.

Move Five: Run the story of Job.

You are familiar with the story of Job.

1. He was a righteous man. A moral and godly man. A man in whom God took great pride.
2. And Job was a man who enjoyed all the blessings of God. He was healthy, wealthy, respected. He had a large and harmonious family. He enjoyed the company of friends. Life was going swimmingly for Job.
3. Then Satan came along.
 - You recall that God boasted about Job's righteousness, his faithfulness.
 - Satan wasn't buying that. Of course Job is faithful. Faithfulness pays!
 - Take away Job's blessings and he will no longer be faithful.
 - Remove the rewards and you remove the basis for faith.
4. And so begins a celestial experiment with earthly consequences.
 - Job is devastated. His wealth is destroyed. His children are killed. His respect is lost. His health is broken.
 - Everything is stripped away. All is lost.
 - Now, will Job still be faithful? Will he still strive for righteousness?
5. The answer to this question is the crux of the book of Job.

The story of Job is not a pleasant story to hear.

1. It is the story of a man sitting on the ash heap of his life trying to understand what has hit him.
2. It is the story of a good and decent man whose life has come unraveled. He has committed no great sin. He has done nothing to deserve the agony he must endure.
3. It is the story of a man trying to make sense of his pain and his life and his God. It is the story of a man for whom simple faith no longer works. Yet he will not abandon God. He will not let go of faith.
 - Job will insist that God has caused his suffering.
 - He will spend much of this book begging God to tell him why.
 - He will hurl questions and accusations at the heavens.
 - It is not a pretty sight.

Move Six: Lessons to look for in Job.

We meet four friends of Job in this book.

1. They are us. They speak all the cliches and nonsense that are common to unthoughtful religious folks of all centuries.
2. They try to put band aids on Job's broken life.
3. And they try to stifle Job's hard questions and bitter complaints.
4. Most of all, they won't let Job be angry with God, something many of us have been guilty of at one time or another.

We learn in this great book:

1. That life is more complicated than we'd like to believe.
2. That God is bigger than we'd like to acknowledge.
3. That we do not understand nearly as much as we think we do.
4. That "faithfulness" looks very different from what we've been led to believe.

And most of all, we learn that faith is not so simple.

1. A faith sufficient in times of plenty may come apart in times of trial.
2. A faith that satisfies us when young may not serve us so well as adults.
3. A faith that deals well with normal life may not suffice for times of crisis and struggle.
4. Like our bodies and minds, faith has to "grow up" if it is to be equal to the difficult questions it must answer.

Many people, in Job's situation, would lose faith.

1. But the real alternative to a simple faith that no longer fits is not the loss of faith, the abandonment of faith.
2. It is, rather, the deepening of faith, the maturing of faith, into something that blesses and sustains us even during the hard passages of our lives.



A Simple Faith?

Why is it that, in a day and time when the questions keep getting harder and more complex, religion tries to package life in ever simpler boxes?

I don't understand what's going on. I hate my life!

Since either way it ends up the same,

I can only conclude that God destroys the good right along with the bad.

Job 9:21-22

You hear it from pulpits, in Bible classes, on Christian radio and TV. You read it in bestselling books by Christian authors. You hear it mouthed by well-meaning friends at times of crisis.

Spiritual pabulum. Platitudes dressed up as profundities. Easy answers for hard questions. Quick fixes for ancient problems.

Of all people, Christians should be able to speak honestly and intelligently about life. We should—in times of

How can we believe in our lives unless we can believe in God, and how can we believe in God unless we can believe in the justice of God, and how can we believe in the justice of God in a world in which the innocent perish in vast meaningless massacres, and brutal and dishonest men foul all lovely things?

Archibald MacLeish

pain and perplexity—say something that makes sense, that offers comfort and hope. If our faith is real, it ought to give us insight and guidance for coping with life.

What, then, are we to make of Christians who see faithfulness as a guarantee of wealth and health? How should we respond to the notion that suffering is always God's punishment for sin or that godly parents will necessarily have godly children? And what are we to do with the rampant triumphalism that is so deeply ingrained in the American religious scene—emphasizing "victory" and "overcoming" and spiritual "success"?

We have confused simple faith with a simplistic faith. And we don't even know it—until the bottom falls out of life . . . until simplistic answers will no longer fit complicated circumstances . . . until cherished words sound hollow and unhelpful.

Job confronts such thinking with the confession, "I don't understand" . . . and the stubbornness to keep questioning until an adequate faith is found.

Daily Study



Monday

Tuesday

Job is confused. He does not understand what has happened to him. He does not understand *why* all this has happened.

Notice how he gives voice to this confusion—and begs God to clarify.

Job's friends, on the other hand, are not confused in the least. They know exactly what is happening to him . . . and why.

They pronounce the orthodoxy of the day, giving voice to a neat and simple faith about God and the way life works.

Write out their simplistic understanding based on their own words:

■ Job 4:7-9

■ Job 5:8, 17-19

■ Job 8:1-6

■ Job 11:1-6

■ Job 20:4-7

■ Job 22:21-27

■ Job 34:5-12

We're thinking this week about a faith that is big enough for life. Look for Job's struggle to rethink his understanding of God and the world. And consider this: the process of developing such a faith is so painful, it could be that only sufferers find

■ Job 7:17-21

■ Job 10:1-7

■ Job 13:20-28

■ Job 21 (esp.. vss 7, 17-21, 29-31)

■ Job 23:3-9

the courage to ask the necessary questions.

Job says boldly what some of us are too timid to say. He makes poetry out of what in many of us is only a tangle of confused whimpers. He shouts out to God what a lot of us mutter behind our sleeves. He refuses to accept the role of a defeated victim.

Eugene Peterson

■ Job 30:20-23

Write out Job's questions and ask if he is not confused with good reason.

Guide

Wednesday Thursday Friday

Job chides his friends for giving answers that don't fit the question. Listen as he responds to their "advice." What does he accuse them of?

- Job 6:21, 24-25
- Job 12:2-3
- Job 13:1-5
- Job 16:1-5
- Job 19:1-6, 21-22
- Job 21:34

Would you be offended if someone spoke to you in such a way? What does Job speak so vehemently about this? Could it be that his suffering has made him impatient (intolerant?) of the easy answers offered by his "friends"?

Read Job 1 & 2.

The problems raised by this book are even greater than Job knew. Apparently, he was unaware of the events chronicled in the first two chapters of this book.

We, however, can read these two chapters—and wince! What sorts of questions are raised by these events?

- What is Satan doing in God's presence?
- What kind of relationship does God have with Satan?
- Why does God boast about Job? Why draw attention to him in the first place?
- Why is Satan so intent on hurting Job? What does he hope to accomplish?
- God may not "cause" Job's suffering, but he certainly allows it. He gives permission. What does this say about God?

Let's use Fridays not for more study, but for prayer and reflection.

Pray that God would show you where you need to grow in your understanding of who He is, who you are, and how life works.

Ask forgiveness for those times when a lack of understanding led you to give platitudes to suffering people.

Pray that God protect you from the evil one. But when the time comes for suffering, ask God to strengthen you and help you suffer faithfully.

Sublime sorrow, sublime reconciliation; oldest choral melody as of the heart of mankind; so soft and great . . . there is nothing written, I think, in the bible or out of it, of equal literary merit.
Thomas Carlyle

Discussion Guide

Most of us have a toolbox around the house—full of worn but usually reliable tools. Occasionally, however, a job will come along for which that hammer with the broken claw or that rusty wrench will not do.

So it is with faith. We can get along on a cliched and unexamined faith for most of the days of our lives. But there comes a day when such a faith is insufficient. It is simply not big enough to make sense of life.

What do we do at such times?

The story of God involves the suffering of a fallen world, and it also involves the suffering of God. God enters our suffering in order to redeem it.
John Mark Hicks

Go around the group and share the first time you ran into a problem your faith could not easily handle.

- What were the circumstances?
- What sort of questions were raised?
- What was naive or unexamined about your understanding of God, yourself, or the world that caused the difficulty?
- How did you resolve the difficulty? In what ways did your faith have to grow and deepen?

The story of Job is the story of a man who runs into a brick wall he does not know how to handle. He is a man of great faith. But his faith, as it is, is not able to keep up with his suffering.

For the benefit of anyone in the group who is not familiar with Job's struggle, would someone summarize the story?

Job has a decision to make. Will he abandon faith? Or will he ask the kind of hard questions that will permit his faith to grow and deepen?

You probably know some folks who found themselves in this same dilemma. You may have faced the dilemma yourself. As a group, tell a couple of stories about people who suffered or questioned and came out with a stronger faith in the end. What permitted faith to win out in these cases?

Now tell a couple of stories where the opposite happened—where struggle resulted in doubt and even disbelief. What was the difference? Why, in these cases, did faith lose out?

None of us knows how we will handle great suffering—faithfully or faithlessly—until we have suffered.

Look at the prayer suggestions on Friday's study (pg. 3). Pray through these things as a group. Pray for one another that, in the hour of trial, Jesus might come close and offer a comfort that produces faithful perseverance.