

Series Job

This Message Friendly Advice

Scriptures Job, Various verses

The book of Job is more than a good story. It was written to provide theological teaching to the followers of God, to help them gain insights into the sometimes hidden purposes of God. It was written so that God's people would have greater trust and confidence in Him.

The book has 42 chapters, almost all of them written as poetry. This means that the author spent a lot of time carefully crafting his message so that it would be both gripping in its interest and have useful instructional content. Beginning in chapter 3 the writing is in the form of a dialogue between Job and several other individuals, including God Himself.

Last week we learned that three friends came from long distances to be with Job. Initially, they sat with Job in silence for seven days, and then they listened as Job vented his emotions about his disappointments with life. He cursed the day of his birth, he wished that he had never been conceived or that he had died during his delivery. He longed for death because it seemed to him that his life had no more purpose.

Near the end of chapter 3 Job questioned the purposes of God who, it seemed to him, gave life to people only to then subject them to miserable experiences. He accused God of intentionally "hiding his plans" for people and "blocking" their way to a meaningful and satisfying life. The friends listened as Job poured out the anguish of his soul, and then they began to speak.

There are three cycles in the dialogue between Job and these friends. Each one spoke in turn followed by responses to each by Job. The interaction between Job and his friends covers chapters 3 through 27. My problem in preparing these messages has been to figure out how to condense the speeches in these chapters in order to communicate to you the style and words of each speaker. After thinking about this for several days, I finally, for better or worse, developed a plan. Today I will summarize the statements made by the friends to Job. Next week I will summarize Job's responses to their statements.

Job's three friends, named Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, must have been very respected men of the Middle East. They came from different regions. Each man knew a lot about God, and they were super confident in their understanding about how a person could get along with God. They were convinced that God dealt with human sin according to the law of "cause and effect." They believed that personal tragedy was the result of sinful behavior and that a man's troubles were his own fault.

From their speeches it quickly became evident that their knowledge was traditional, narrow, and judgmental, and that they were unwilling to consider the possibility that Job's situation was unique. They felt that Job was not being honest with them when he insisted on his innocence. They felt that Job was disparaging the justice of God. Therefore, they took it on themselves to defend the honor of the LORD and to teach the truth, as they understood it, to Job. It was their mission to straighten out his theological thinking.

The three friends represent some religious people today. When these people encounter a theological issue that is different from what they have long held to be true, they tend to dogmatically fall back on their previous experiences and observations. They can be argumentative to the point of being obnoxious. Rather than examine new phenomena, rather than thinking "outside the box" of their existing knowledge, rather than going deeper into theological issues, they "dig in their heels" and rigorously defend their opinions. There were elements of truth in what Job's friends said. Their problem was disregarding what did not fit into their narrow thought patterns.

Think about their situation. They did not know about God's purpose in allowing the Accuser to afflict Job, nor did they know God's evaluation of Job — that he was blameless and upright. Because of their fixed understanding, they believed that God always punished evildoers, and since they observed that Job was suffering, they therefore jumped to the conclusion that Job was a sinner. With the best of intentions, they tried to help Job back to a relationship with God. They counseled him to repent of his evil ways.

Because of his suffering, Job himself was being forced to revise his understanding about God. He knew that he was innocent of wrongdoing. He was unable to come up with a logical reason for his afflictions. What he had previously believed to be true was inadequate to explain the changes in his situation. His experience of suffering was forcing him to reevaluate his relationship with God, compelling him to seek some new level of understanding that would account for what was happening. That's a brief explanation of the starting point for the dialogues.

Eliphaz was probably the oldest of the three friends, hence he was the first to respond to Job. He came from Teman, a town located south and east of the Dead Sea. Here are his first words:

Read Job 4:1-9

1 Then Eliphaz the Temanite replied: 2 "If someone ventures a word with you, will you be impatient? But who can keep from speaking? 3 Think how you have instructed many, how you have strengthened feeble hands. 4 Your words have supported those who stumbled; you have strengthened faltering knees. 5 But now trouble comes to you, and you are discouraged; it strikes you, and you are dismayed. 6 Should not your piety be your confidence and your blameless ways your hope? 7 Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed? 8 As I have observed, those who plow evil and those who sow trouble reap it. 9 At the breath of God they are destroyed; at the blast of his anger they perish."

Eliphaz began his speech with words which were gentle and considerate of Job. However, very quickly he got to his main point: people do not suffer without a cause. Notice what he had observed: "Those who plow evil and sow trouble reap the consequences." Eliphaz believed that God was punishing Job for some sin. He was tactful enough to not directly accuse Job of terrible sin, but it was an obvious inference.

In the next reading Eliphaz spoke of his qualifications to teach Job.

Read Job 4:12-19

“A word was secretly brought to me, my ears caught a whisper of it. 13 Amid disquieting dreams in the night, when deep sleep falls on men, 14 fear and trembling seized me and made all my bones shake. 15 A spirit glided past my face, and the hair on my body stood on end. 16 It stopped, but I could not tell what it was. A form stood before my eyes, and I heard a hushed voice: 17 ‘Can a mortal be more righteous than God? Can a man be more pure than his Maker? 18 If God places no trust in his servants, if he charges his angels with error, 19 how much more those who live in houses of clay, whose foundations are in the dust, who are crushed more readily than a moth!’”

It seems that Eliphaz had had a charismatic type of experience. He recounted this strange religious experience in order to back up his opinion. There was something creepy and unnerving about the vision he saw. “His bones shook.” “The hair on his body stood on end.” The spirit form which appeared to him revealed a special message: “No mortal can be righteous and pure before the Creator.” The words of the apparition convinced Eliphaz that humans bring trouble on themselves, and that everyone deserves the suffering that comes to them.

Next Eliphaz boldly told Job what he should do.

Read Job 5:8-9, 11, 17-18

“But if it were I, I would appeal to God; I would lay my cause before him. 9 He performs wonders that cannot be fathomed, miracles that cannot be counted.

11 The lowly he sets on high, and those who mourn are lifted to safety.

17 “Blessed is the man whom God corrects; so do not despise the discipline of the Almighty. 18 For he wounds, but he also binds up; he injures, but his hands also heal.”

Eliphaz understood that suffering can have an educational and disciplining purpose. The implication is that if a person submits to the chastening of suffering, he or she will become a better person. Sometimes this is true, but not always. The advice can be helpful and bring about beneficial changes in behavior, but all too often, the advice is viewed as unnecessarily judgmental. Many people whose suffering is not due to wrong-doing, like Job, become neurotic because they cannot discover any link between their suffering and their behavior.

This line of counseling leads to a probing into the life of the sufferer in an effort to identify the specific sin which must be confessed and for which repentance must be sought. This was the approach used by Job's friends. Their inclination was to blame the sufferer for getting into difficulties. Incidentally, this is the unfortunate approach of many Christian counselors.

In his first speech Eliphaz considered Job to be a righteous man temporarily chastened by God, but by the second round of speeches he was convinced that Job was a hardened sinner in arrogant rebellion against God. We must keep in mind that Job responded to each of the speeches of his friends. Eliphaz and the friends thought that Job's statements were evidence of his sins — that his words were blasphemous. They were frustrated that Job did not accept their instructions, and, in reprimanding him, they became increasingly sarcastic and insensitive. Here's an example:

Read Job 15:1-6, 12-13

Then Eliphaz the Temanite replied: 2 "Would a wise man answer with empty notions or fill his belly with the hot east wind? 3 Would he argue with useless words, with speeches that have no value? 4 But you even undermine piety and hinder devotion to God. 5 Your sin prompts your mouth; you adopt the tongue of the crafty. 6 Your own mouth condemns you, not mine; your own lips testify against you."

12 "Why has your heart carried you away, and why do your eyes flash, 13 so that you vent your rage against God and pour out such words from your mouth?"

Job had insisted that wicked people can prosper and that innocent people, like himself, sometimes suffer. Eliphaz could not accept this opinion and he explained the basis of his beliefs:

Read Job 15:17-18, 20

17 "Listen to me and I will explain to you; let me tell you what I have seen, 18 what wise men have declared, hiding nothing received from their fathers: 20 All his days the wicked man suffers torment, the ruthless through all the years stored up for him."

According to Eliphaz, revelation, wisdom, and tradition were on his side. Verse 17 is another reference to the vision he described in his first speech. According to Eliphaz, all sources of information pointed to the fact that wicked people, in this life, get what they deserve. They cannot escape suffering.

Eliphaz brought his speechmaking to its conclusion with an appeal for Job to repent of his ways.

Read Job 22:21-23a

“Submit to God and be at peace with him; in this way prosperity will come to you. 22 Accept instruction from his mouth and lay up his words in your heart. 23 If you return to the Almighty, you will be restored.”

That’s our quick overview of the speeches of Eliphaz, and he was the nicest of the three friends!

The second individual who came to be with Job was named Bildad. He had even less patience and restraint than Eliphaz. Each time when it was his turn to speak, he launched immediately into a denunciation of Job’s thoughts.

Read Job 8:1-4

Then Bildad the Shuhite replied: 2 “How long will you say such things? Your words are a blustering wind. 3 Does God pervert justice? Does the Almighty pervert what is right? 4 When your children sinned against him, he gave them over to the penalty of their sin.”

Bildad was a hard-nosed dogmatist! He was blunt. He went for the “jugular.” He accused Job of perverting the truth of God’s justice and righteousness by insisting that innocent people are subject to suffering (*Job 8:3*). According to Bildad, if an innocent person was suffering, it would be evidence that God was not following His own standards of moral order, and because God cannot act against His standards, the conclusion was clear – Job’s children were sinners and paid the penalty for their sins. Such a cutting remark to a grieving father! and Job had sinned and was reaping the consequences of his sin.

The theology of Bildad was based on tradition.

Read Job 8:8, 10

“Ask the former generations and find out what their fathers learned. 10 Will they not instruct you and tell you? Will they not bring forth words from their understanding?”

Eliphaz had based his arguments on his personal observations (“I have seen”) and his personal experience (the “terrifying dream”). Bildad appealed to tradition, the conclusions of others. Actually, the argument of Bildad was stronger than that of Eliphaz — tradition is, in fact, a greater authority than personal opinion. Bildad hoped that the declarations of “past generations” and “the fathers” (*Job 8:8*) would influence Job and cause him to see the error of his thinking. He said that if Job would investigate the truths held by the forefathers, it would confirm the views of the friends.

Bildad did not let up on his harsh style. He accused Job of being closed-minded. Notice how he began his second speech:

Read Job 18:1-4

Then Bildad the Shuhite replied: 2 “When will you end these speeches? Be sensible, and then we can talk. 3 Why are we regarded as cattle and considered stupid in your sight? 4 You who tear yourself to pieces in your anger, is the earth to be abandoned for your sake? Or must the rocks be moved from their place?”

And then he launched into a long description of the fate of evil people, beginning with these words:

Read Job 18:5-7

“The lamp of the wicked is snuffed out; the flame of his fire stops burning. 6 The light in his tent becomes dark; the lamp beside him goes out. 7 The vigor of his step is weakened; his own schemes throw him down.”

After reading the statements of Bildad, we might conclude: “With friends like these, who needs enemies.”

Now we are ready to consider the opinions of the third friend. His name was Zophar. In his first speech, he accused Job of foolish and ignorant words. He was angry because Job did not accept the advice he was being given:

Read Job 11:1-6

Then Zophar the Naamathite replied: 2 “Are all these words to go unanswered? Is this talker to be vindicated? 3 Will your idle talk reduce men to silence? Will no one rebuke you when you mock? 4 You say to God, ‘My beliefs are flawless and I am pure in your sight.’ 5 Oh, how I wish that God would speak, that he would open his lips against you 6 and disclose to you the secrets of wisdom.”

Zophar then questioned Job’s understanding of God.

Read Job 11:7-9

7 “Can you fathom the mysteries of God? Can you probe the limits of the Almighty? 8 They are higher than the heavens, what can you do? They are deeper than the depths of the grave, what can you know? 9 Their measure is longer than the earth and wider than the sea.”

Zophar was convinced that Job lacked an understanding of the true nature of God. However, he was convinced that he knew the truth. Zophar was a traditionalist, like Bildad. He was also a proud man. He assumed that his health and prosperity was proof of his goodness and approval by God. Yet he accused Job of arrogance!

Read Job 20:4-7a

4 “Surely you know how it has been from of old, ever since man was placed on the earth, 5 that the mirth of the wicked is brief, the joy of the godless lasts but a moment. 6 Though his pride reaches to the heavens and his head touches the clouds, 7 he will perish forever, like his own dung.”

In conclusion, let’s review the attitudes of the friends. First, they were adamant about their theological convictions. They were unanimous in their view that the righteous were rewarded and the unrighteous punished in this life, and that Job therefore was a sinner in need of repentance. Their reasoning: All suffering is punishment for sin; Job is suffering; therefore Job is a sinner. This is a cause-and-effect relationship which states that a person gets what he has done.

Secondly, the friends started with a sincere desire to comfort and help Job. They wanted him to be restored to health and prosperity. Unfortunately, they became more concerned with their theological correctness than they were about providing comfort to a man in agony, with the result that they did more harm than good.

Thirdly, the friends based their arguments on three conventional beliefs. Eliphaz based his arguments on personal observation and experience. Bildad based his theology on traditional teaching. His advice was to “learn from past generations” (*Job 8:8*). Zophar emphasized the unknowability of God, even though he presumed to know what God was doing to Job. All three of the friends considered God to be predictable in regard to cause and effect, and, according to their beliefs, Job was most definitely a sinner.

Lastly, the friends looked upon the sufferings of Job as matter of principle, not compassion. They were convinced that they represented wisdom which had been accumulated through many years of living. They became more and more preoccupied with their own opinions. As a result, they had arrogant, smug, self-righteous attitudes. A statement by Eliphaz summed up their theological positions:

Read Job 5:27

27 "We have examined this, and it is true. So hear it and apply it to yourself."

There are many believers in the world today who have rigid inflexible ideas about God. They are sincere in their beliefs, but their understanding is limited. Too many believers are unwilling to consider new ways of thinking about truth. They are afraid to probe into the Word of God for fear that new insights might corrupt and compromise their existing beliefs. These believers unfortunately run the risk of not discovering the deeper revelations of God. Yes, the LORD said, "My ways are higher than your ways, my thoughts than your thoughts" (*Isaiah 55:9*), but God encourages us to investigate His ways.

The Apostle Paul prayed this prayer for us: "I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him (the Lord Jesus) better. I pray that the eyes of your hearts may be enlightened in order that you may know 1) the hope to which he has called you, 2) the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and 3) his incomparably great power for us who believe" (*Ephesians 1:17-19*).