2 The first round (Job 3–11)

The narrator introduced us to Job as an upright person who was being tested by the heavenly court. The question was: would Job remain faithful to God even if there were no advantages to doing so? Everything was taken from him: his business, his children, and finally his health.

The main drama now begins as we listen to Job's expressions of grief and loss. Life makes no sense anymore. He doesn't give up on God, but he can't understand what God is doing to him.

Three friends come to support him in his loss, but they're disturbed by Job's insistence that he doesn't deserve what God has given him. They try to defend the justice of God, saying that God cannot be wrong so the fault must be with Job.

Any questions before we being listening to their wisdom discussions?

2.1 Job: I'm in anguish (chapter 3)

Before we look at the content of the dramatic exchanges between Job and friends, note how their words are presented in **poetic** form. Today's translations divide the words into lines, like the Psalms. The lines don't rhyme like English poetry. In Hebrew poetry, it's the meaning of the lines that rhyme. What's expressed in one line is expressed in a parallel way in the next line.

For example, Job says:

> **Job 3:11 (NIV)**
>
> 11 "Why did I not perish at birth,
> and die as I came from the womb?"

The two lines express the same truth in parallel ways. What's the point of life if everything Job has worked for is gone? Wouldn't it be better if he'd never been born rather than all these years that ended up nowhere.

Parallelism helps us to get the message by expressing the same truth another way:

> *Hebrew parallelism really helps us understand the text;*
> *expressing the meaning another way clarifies what's being said.*

(Did you see what we did there?)

Okay, let's listen to Job's lament:

> **Job 3:20-26 (NIV)**
>
> 20 "Why is light given to those in misery,
> and life to the bitter of soul,
> 21 to those who long for death that does not come,
> who search for it more than for hidden treasure,

22 who are filled with gladness
and rejoice when they reach the grave?
23 Why is life given to a man whose way is hidden,
whom God has hedged in?
24 For sighing has become my daily food;
my groans pour out like water.
25 What I feared has come upon me;
what I dreaded has happened to me.
26 I have no peace, no quietness;
I have no rest, but only turmoil."

Can you understand Job's grief? Are you okay with listening to someone who feels their life is meaningless? In some of the Babylonian tales, the friends rejected the person who had lost everything. Sitting with them and hearing their sorrow with empathy is so valuable for the grieving person.

Job asks, ***"Why?"*** (verses 11, 12, 16, 20, 23). When suffering seems senseless, we ask why. Why was my child taken from me? Why did that fraudster ruin my business? What did I do to deserve this?

Don't answer that question. Just be present and listen.

Some interpreters use verse 25 to answer Job. When Job said, *"What I feared has come upon me,"* they say, "Ah, there's the negative confession! Job's fear opened the door for the devil to take everything from him." They just made it Job's fault!

That's bad counselling: imposing your opinion on a suffering person instead of hearing them. It's also bad theology. It's what Job's friends did: blaming Job for his sufferings. Make it Job's fault and you'll have God opposing your theology, declaring, *"You have not spoken the truth about me"* (42:7).

2.2 Eliphaz: God can't be wrong (chapters 3–4)

First to respond to Job is Eliphaz (pronounced *El'i-faz*). He's from Teman, an Edomite town legendary for its wisdom (Jeremiah 49:7). Eliphaz is convinced the world is just, that God ensures people get what they deserve:

Job 4:7-9 (NIV)

7 "Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished?
Where were the upright ever destroyed?
8 As I have observed, those who plough evil
and those who sow trouble reap it.
9 At the breath of God they perish;
at the blast of his anger they are no more."

Eliphaz claims to have prophetic insight to confirm his belief that God is always right, so the problem must be with us when things go wrong:

Job 4:12-17 (NIV)

12 "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 people,
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 even a strong man be more pure than his Maker?'"

This spirit affirmed the retribution principle for Eliphaz. Anyone who claims to be more righteous than God is fooling themselves. Since God cannot be wrong, Job's sufferings must be the result of wrongdoing on his part. Job must accept that God is correcting him, even if he doesn't know what he's done wrong, Eliphas says:

Job 5:17-27 (NIV)

17 "Blessed is the one 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.
19 From six calamities he will rescue you;
in seven no harm will touch you.
20 In famine he will deliver you from death,
and in battle from the stroke of the sword.
21 You will be protected from the lash of the tongue,
and need not fear when destruction comes.
22 You will laugh at destruction and famine,
and need not fear the wild animals.
23 For you will have a covenant with the stones of the field,
and the wild animals will be at peace with you.
24 You will know that your tent is secure;
you will take stock of your property and find nothing missing.
25 You will know that your children will be many,
and your descendants like the grass of the earth.
26 You will come to the grave in full vigour,
like sheaves gathered in season.
27 "We have examined this, and it is true.
So hear it and apply it to yourself."

What do you make of those outstanding promises? Ask an AI chatbot to give you some Bible verses on divine protection and it may direct you to this passage. But is Eliphaz speaking the truth?

This is not Job's experience. Job did not *take stock of his property and find nothing missing* (verse 24). Job's *children* are no longer *many* (verse 25).

Eliphaz took a truth (God is more righteous than mortals), and twisted it into an accusation against Job. Eliphaz has joined the accuser in saying Job is not *blameless and upright* as God declared him to be (Job 1:8). At the end of the book, the LORD says to Eliphaz, *"I am angry with you and your two friends because you have not spoken the truth about me as my servant Job has"* (Job 42:7).

It's all too easy to twist a prophetic message into an accusation that's contrary to God's heart. *Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world* (1 John 4:1).

Can you think of examples of pious people condemning those around them? Did Jesus face that from Pharisees? Did the church of the Middle Ages focus on people's guilt? Have Reformation churches continued that tradition? Do evangelists manipulate people's feelings of guilt to get decisions? Eliphaz is still among us.[12]

2.3 Job: Why is God opposing me? (chapters 6–7)

Condemnation by Eliphaz only adds to Job's suffering. He feels like God has destroyed his life, so it would be better if God took his life too:

Job 6:4, 8-9 (NIV)

4 "The arrows of the Almighty are in me,
my spirit drinks in their poison;
God's terrors are marshalled against me. …

8 "Oh, that I might have my request,
that God would grant what I hope for,
9 that God would be willing to crush me,
to let loose his hand and cut off my life!"

Job so desperately needs friends to demonstrate God's heart for him. But his friends are so bent on defending God that they condemn Job:

Job 6:14-29 (NIV)

14 "Anyone who withholds kindness from a friend
forsakes the fear of the Almighty.
15 But my brothers are as undependable as intermittent streams …
17 that stop flowing in the dry season …
21 You too have proved to be of no help;
you see something dreadful and are afraid. …
28 "But now be so kind as to look at me. Would I lie to your face?
29 Relent, do not be unjust; reconsider, for my integrity is at stake."

They're no longer looking at Job. He's a difficult sight: "My body is clothed with worms and scabs, my skin is broken and festering" (7:5).

[12] This does not mean that everything Job's friends said was wrong, e.g. 1 Corinthians 3:19 quotes Job 3:13.

Job refuses to sit in silence. Words are all he has to process his grief:

Job 7:11, 15-16 (NIV)

11 "Therefore I will not keep silent;
I will speak out in the anguish of my spirit,
I will complain in the bitterness of my soul. …
15 I prefer strangling and death,
rather than this body of mine.
16 I despise my life; I would not live forever.
Let me alone; my days have no meaning."

But Job has not given up on God. His expressions of anguish are prayers to God:

Job 7:17-21 (NIV)

17 "What is mankind that you make so much of them,
that you give them so much attention,
18 that you examine them every morning
and test them every moment?
19 Will you never look away from me,
or let me alone even for an instant?
20 If I have sinned, what have I done to you,
you who sees everything we do?
Why have you made me your target?
Have I become a burden to you?
21 Why do you not pardon my offenses
and forgive my sins?
For I will soon lie down in the dust;
you will search for me, but I will be no more."

2.4 Bildad: retribution theology (chapter 8)

Bildad is also non-Jewish. We have no idea where a *Shuhite* is from. Presumably it's somewhere to the east, since that's where Job was.

Job 8:1-3 (NIV)

1 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?

Bildad says God would never *pervert justice* (verse 3). By "justice" he means retribution (giving people what they deserve). Bildad believes it is Job who is perverting justice by claiming his sufferings are undeserved. If God is punishing him, Job must be guilty. If the house collapsed and killed his children (1:19), they deserved to die:

Job 8:4-6 (NIV)

4 When your children sinned against him,
he gave them over to the penalty of their sin.
5 But if you will seek God earnestly
and plead with the Almighty,
6 if you are pure and upright,
even now he will rouse himself on your behalf
and restore you to your prosperous state.

Bildad says Job must repent, for it must be sin that's causing his suffering. For Bildad, sticks and carrots (punishment and reward) are the tools God uses to enforce justice:

Job 8:20-22 (NIV)

20 "Surely God does not reject one who is blameless
or strengthen the hands of evildoers."
21 He will yet fill your mouth with laughter
and your lips with shouts of joy.
22 Your enemies will be clothed in shame,
and the tents of the wicked will be no more."

2.5 Job: How can I prove I'm not guilty? (chapters 9–10)

Job 9:1-3 (NIV)

1 Then Job replied:
2 "Indeed, I know that this is true.
But how can mere mortals prove their innocence before God?
3 Though they wished to dispute with him,
they could not answer him one time out of a thousand."

Job has no argument with the concept that bad behaviour generally leads to bad outcomes, but he does not believe that's an inviolable law. Job wants to know how an innocent sufferer could prove their innocence to God.

If you were wronged in the ancient world, you could bring your case to the ruling monarch. Solomon's wisdom to resolve injustice was legendary. In one famous case, two mothers claimed the same baby, and Solomon's judgement identified the true mother (1 Kings 3:16-28).

Job wants to present his case before the God who reigns in the heavenly court. If Job could prove he was suffering unjustly, God might bring an end to his suffering and allow Job to get on with his life again. This is the seed of an idea that grows as the Book of Job unfolds.

Job says:

Job 9:4-19 (NIV)

4 "His wisdom is profound, his power is vast.
Who has resisted him and come out unscathed? …
6 He shakes the earth from its place
and makes its pillars tremble. …
8 He alone stretches out the heavens
and treads on the waves of the sea.
9 He is the Maker of the Bear and Orion,
the Pleiades and the constellations of the south. …
11 When he passes me, I cannot see him;
when he goes by, I cannot perceive him.
12 If he snatches away, who can stop him?
Who can say to him, 'What are you doing?' …
14 "**How then can I dispute with him?**
How can I find words to argue with him?
15 Though I were innocent, I could not answer him;
I could only plead with my Judge for mercy. …
19 If it is a matter of strength, he is mighty!
And if it is a matter of justice, who can challenge him?"

Job acknowledges God's cosmic authority and power, in heaven and on earth. But that only makes it more difficult to prove the case that Job's suffering is undeserved.

Job yearns for an advocate to plead his case before God:

Job 9:32-35 (NIV)

32 "He is not a mere mortal like me that I might answer him,
that we might confront each other in court.
33 If only there were someone to **mediate** between us,
someone to bring us together,
34 someone to remove God's rod from me,
so that his terror would frighten me no more.
35 Then I would speak up without fear of him,
but as it now stands with me, I cannot.

As long as God does not release him from his suffering, Job feels his life is not worth living:

Job 10:1-2 (NIV)

1 "I loathe my very life;
therefore I will give free rein to my complaint
and speak out in the bitterness of my soul.
2 I say to God: Do not declare me guilty,
but tell me what charges you have against me."

Stage irony is when the audience knows something the player does not. Job does not know it, but the heavenly court has already ruled him to be *blameless and upright* (1:8).

Facing accusation from friends who believe God operates by the retribution principle, the innocent sufferer spends his life trying to prove his innocence:

Job 10:14-16 (NIV)

14 "If I sinned, you would be watching me
and would not let my offense go unpunished.
15 If I am guilty—woe to me!
Even if I am innocent, I cannot lift my head,
for I am full of shame and drowned in my affliction.
16 If I hold my head high, you stalk me like a lion
and again display your awesome power against me."

If this is the only life God has for him, Job doesn't want it:

Job 10:18 (NIV)

18 "Why then did you bring me out of the womb?
I wish I had died before any eye saw me."

2.6 Zophar: Just submit! (chapter 11)

Job's third friend steps up. We don't know where the town of Naamath is. Like Eliphaz and Bildad, Zophar believes that Job must be guilty if God is making him suffer:

Job 11:1-10 (NIV)

1 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 others 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,
for true wisdom has two sides.
Know this: God has even forgotten some of your sin.
7 "Can you fathom the mysteries of God?
Can you probe the limits of the Almighty?
8 They are higher than the heavens above—what can you do?
They are deeper than the depths below—what can you know?
9 Their measure is longer than the earth and wider than the sea.
10 "If he comes along and confines you in prison
and convenes a court, who can oppose him?"

To Zophar, Job's words sound proud, as if he knows better than God. Job needs to stop struggling against God, and submit to God. God cannot be wrong.

Many religions call their adherents to **submit** to God. Christians sing, "All to Jesus I surrender." Rabbis call Israel to submit to "the yoke of the Torah."[13] Islam means "submission," submitting to the will of Allah.[14] For Buddhists, the way to peace is to stop struggling against the universe.

Zophar promises:

> **Job 11:13-15 (NIV)**
> 13 "Yet if you devote your heart to him
> and stretch out your hands to him,
> 14 if you put away the sin that is in your hand
> and allow no evil to dwell in your tent,
> 15 then, free of fault, you will lift up your face;
> you will stand firm and without fear."

I've heard sermons declaring Zophar's promise. There are books promoting his view. Is he right? Should Job follow Zophar's wisdom, submit to whatever God is doing, and give up on his attempt to present his case before God? What do you think?

2.7 Conclusion

We've listened to Job expressing anguish of soul and body. It's meaningless to live like this. Clearing his name before the heavenly throne is the only thing Job can think of that will change his fortunes.

On the other hand, Job's friends advise him to accept what God has given him. They all say Job must be wrong, because God cannot be:

- **Eliphaz**: Divine justice cannot be wrong; it must be you who is at fault.
- **Bildad**: God always gives people what they deserve (retribution theology).
- **Zophar**: Stop resisting God. Just submit.

Should Job give in, or should he keep fighting God? A less experienced person would probably give in at this point. That's what happens in one of the Babylonian wisdom stories where a younger man admits his guilt to end his misery, even though he does not know what he has done wrong. It says:

> He recounts the burdens he suffered to his lord,
> The young man expounds the misery he is suffering:
> "My Lord, I have debated with myself, and in my feelings
> […] of heart: **the wrong I did I do not know!** [15]

[13] "b. Sanh. 11:1, I.61.B" in *The Babylonian Talmud* translated by Jacob Neusner (Hendrickson, 2011), 16:505.

[14] "Islam" in *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

[15] "Dialogue Between a Man and his God" in William W. Hallo, *The Context of Scripture* (Brill, 1997), 1:485.

Is that what Job should do? To hear what he actually does, come back next week for the second round of wisdom speeches between Job and his three friends (Job 12–20).

Further reading

John Hartley comments on what Job's three friends believe:

> Unfortunately, and obviously without realizing it, **Eliphaz** sides with the Satan against God in offering this counsel, for he seeks to motivate Job to serve God for the benefits that piety brings. … But should Job follow his advice he would fall into the trap the Satan has set. If Job is to find God, he will have to chart a new course, a route different from the one Eliphaz has laid out.[16]
>
> After renouncing Job's complaint that God is treating him unjustly, **Bildad** instructs Job about the certainty of double retribution. There are no exceptions to retribution. The blameless are always blessed by God and the wicked always punished. Any circumstances to the contrary are either illusory or momentary. This can be proved by the teaching of the fathers and by the patterns of nature. In Bildad's opinion it is unequivocally true that God does not pervert justice. He thus equates justice with double retribution.[17]
>
> **Zophar** has taken the final step in the logic of the doctrine of retribution, concluding that Job is suffering for some hidden sin. For him it means that Job's suffering is justly deserved. … There remains only one way for Job to escape his plight—the way of repentance. … If Job remains obstinate, he will experience the futile end that all the wicked experience.[18]

[16] John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job*, New International Commentary on the O.T. (Eerdmans, 1988), 129.

[17] John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job*, New International Commentary on the O.T. (Eerdmans, 1988), 164.

[18] John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job*, New International Commentary on the O.T. (Eerdmans, 1988), 204.