3 The second round (Job 12–20)

In the first round of discussion (Job 3–11), we heard Job wishing he was dead rather than suffering the humiliating shame of losing everything. What's the point of going on if everything you've achieved falls apart? Job wants his name cleared and his life restored.

His friends argue that Job must be at fault, for God gives everyone what they deserve (retribution theology). They promise that God will restore him if he admits his guilt.

Any questions before we explore their second round of attempts to make sense of Job's pain?

3.1 Job: You're making my suffering worse (chapters 12–14)

Job says their accusations only make his suffering worse:

Job 12:1-5 (NIV)

1 Then Job replied:

2 "Doubtless you are the only people who matter,
and wisdom will die with you!
3 But I have a mind as well as you; I am not inferior to you.
Who does not know all these things?
4 "I have become a laughingstock to my friends,
though I called on God and he answered—
a mere laughingstock, though righteous and blameless!
5 Those who are at ease have contempt for misfortune
as the fate of those whose feet are slipping."

All who care for people need to hear Job's words. When we come across as condescending, we make the suffering person feel inferior.

What do we mean when we sing, "God is good"? Is it, "God is good to me"? As we sing those songs, I wonder about the Jobs in our congregation, the people who would say, "Yes, I believe God is good, but I'm not experiencing God's goodness right now." The suffering is real when a partner has been unfaithful, when an employee defrauded you, or when you received a bad health diagnosis. Lament is the most common genre in the Psalms, though not in our songs today.

Job declares God's sovereignty:

Job 12:13-14 (NIV)

13 "To God belong wisdom and power;
counsel and understanding are his.
14 What he tears down cannot be rebuilt;
those he imprisons cannot be released."

Job also declares how harmful it is when his comforters set themselves up as judges instead of supporters:

Job 13:1-4 (NIV)

1 "My eyes have seen all this, my ears have heard and understood it.
2 What you know, I also know; I am not inferior to you.
3 But I desire to speak to the Almighty and to argue my case with God.
4 You, however, smear me with lies;
you are worthless physicians, all of you!"

To defend God, they condemn Job:

Job 13:5-8 (NIV)

5 "If only you would be altogether silent! For you, that would be wisdom.
6 Hear now my argument; listen to the pleas of my lips.
7 Will you speak wickedly on God's behalf?
Will you speak deceitfully for him?
8 Will you show him partiality? Will you argue the case for God?"

When we set ourselves up as judges, we're usurping God's authority, trying to be a god by claiming the knowledge of good and evil in our own hands (Genesis 3:5). To pass judgement on another is to rebel against the true Judge (Romans 2:1-3).

That's the problem. In their attempt to defend God's honour, they condemn Job:

Job 13:9-15 (NIV)

9 "Would it turn out well if he examined you?
Could you deceive him as you might deceive a mortal?
10 He would surely call you to account if you secretly showed partiality.
11 Would not his splendour terrify you?
Would not the dread of him fall on you?
12 Your maxims are proverbs of ashes;
your defences are defences of clay.
13 "Keep silent and let me speak; then let come to me what may.
14 Why do I put myself in jeopardy and take my life in my hands?
15 Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him;
I will surely defend my ways to his face."

Job doesn't want them to judge his case. He wants to hear from God why he is being treated as he is:

Job 13:17-22 (NIV)

17 "Listen carefully to what I say; let my words ring in your ears.
18 Now that I have prepared my case, I know I will be vindicated.
19 Can anyone bring charges against me? If so, I will be silent and die.
20 "Only grant me these two things, God,
and then I will not hide from you:

21 "Withdraw your hand far from me,
and stop frightening me with your terrors.
22 Then summon me and I will answer,
or let me speak, and you reply to me."

But how can Job present his case in the heavenly court?

As the days and months of Job's miserable life tick by, Job laments that mortal life will be too short to clear his name (Job 14).

3.2 Eliphaz: You're promoting ungodliness, Job (chapter 15)

Job 15:1-6 (NIV)

1 Then Eliphaz the Temanite replied:

2 "Would a wise person answer with empty notions
or fill their belly with the hot east wind?
3 Would they 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."

For Eliphaz, retribution theology is the foundation of wisdom. He views anyone who denies it as a hot-headed windbag (verse 2). He says Job's speeches contribute nothing of value (verse 3). For Eliphaz, denying retribution theology is *hindering devotion to God*—as if people won't serve God unless they benefit by doing so (verse 4).

Ironically, that's the very accusation that triggered the test Job is enduring. Eliphaz believes what Satan said (1:9-11). Eliphaz has joined Satan in condemning Job. Questioning divine retribution is sin, Eliphaz says (verses 5-6).

Job 15:12-13 (NIV)

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?"

Having labelled Job as a sinner who dared to question divine retribution, Eliphaz spends the rest of his speech telling Job he deserves what he got:

Job 15:20-26 (NIV)

20 "All his days the wicked man suffers torment,
the ruthless man through all the years stored up for him."
21 Terrifying sounds fill his ears;
when all seems well, marauders attack him.
22 He despairs of escaping the realm of darkness;
he is marked for the sword.

23 He wanders about for food like a vulture;
he knows the day of darkness is at hand.
24 Distress and anguish fill him with terror;
troubles overwhelm him, like a king poised to attack,
25 **because he shakes his fist at God**
and vaunts himself against the Almighty,
26 defiantly charging against him with a thick, strong shield."

3.3 Job: Can someone help present my case? (chapters 16–17)

His friends have judged Job, instead of supporting him in his pain. They think they're defending God's justice, but they've sided with the Accuser. It's easier to accuse than to empathize.

Job 16:1-5 (NIV)

1 Then Job replied:
2 "I have heard many things like these;
you are miserable comforters, all of you!
3 Will your long-winded speeches never end?
What ails you that you keep on arguing?
4 I also could speak like you, if you were in my place;
I could make fine speeches against you and shake my head at you.
5 But my mouth would encourage you;
comfort from my lips would bring you relief."

Job returns to the question of how he can present his case before the heavenly court to prove he does not deserve what he's experiencing:

Job 16:16-21 (NIV)

16 "My face is red with weeping, dark shadows ring my eyes;
17 yet my hands have been free of violence and my prayer is pure.
18 "**Earth, do not cover my blood**; may my cry never be laid to rest!
19 Even now my **witness** is in heaven; my **advocate** is on high.
20 My **intercessor** is my friend as my eyes pour out tears to God;
21 on behalf of a man he pleads with God as one pleads for a friend."

Job suffered violence as raiders stole his flocks and killed his servants (1:13-17), but there's no blood on Job's hands, nothing that would interfere with his plea of innocence before God's throne (verse 17). Job has nothing left to lose but his life. He fears he will soon lose that too. Then no one will remember his unjust sufferings.

But how do you get the heavenly court to investigate matters on earth? Abel's blood on the earth brought God to investigate Cain: *"The LORD said 'What have you done? Listen! 'Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground'"* (Genesis 4:10).

Job does not know how the heavenly court works. He does not know God has been watching his case carefully, even before his troubles began. He does not know an Accuser is prosecuting a case against him (1:8-11). But there must be someone in the heavenly court who could argue his case and bring his suffering to an end.

Job calls this person his:

- ***witness***: someone who sees his sufferings and recounts them to the court
- ***advocate***: a defence lawyer to present his case before the throne (v. 19)
- ***intercessor***: a mediator to negotiate between God and people (v. 20)
- ***representative***: someone to defend him *as one pleads for a friend* (v. 21).

That's what Job needs. He's not finding that among his friends:

Job 17:10-15 (NIV)

10 "But come on, all of you, try again!
I will not find a wise man among you.
11 My days have passed, my plans are shattered. …
13 If the only home I **hope** for is the grave …
15 where then is my **hope**— who can see any **hope** for me?"

Hope is crucial to life. Everything Job hoped for is gone. He doesn't dare to hope for anything again. By accusing Job of deserving his loss, his friends undermine any hope he may have had: *"You destroy a person's hope"* (14:19).

3.4 Bildad: You must be wicked to suffer like this (chapter 18)

Bildad rejects Job's claim to innocence. Only a wicked person could have earned the sufferings Job has brought on himself:

Job 18:1-21 (NIV)

1 Then Bildad the Shuhite replied:
2 "When will you end these speeches?
Be sensible, and then we can talk. …
5 "The lamp of a wicked man is snuffed out;
the flame of his fire stops burning. …
17 The memory of him perishes from the earth;
he has no name in the land.
18 He is driven from light into the realm of darkness
and is banished from the world.
19 He has no offspring or descendants among his people,
no survivor where once he lived.
20 People of the west are appalled at his fate;
those of the east are seized with horror.
21 Surely such is the dwelling of an evil man;
such is the place of one who does not know God."

With the sensitivity of a freight train, Bildad smashes into the wreck of Job's life, the loss of his children (verse 19), his honour (verse 20), and his innocence (verse 21). Jobs's response is hardly surprising.

3.5 Job: Surely there is a redeemer (chapter 19)

Job 19:1-6 (NIV)

1 Then Job replied:

2 "How long will you torment me and crush me with words?
3 Ten times now you have reproached me; shamelessly you attack me.
4 If it is true that I have gone astray, my error remains my concern alone.
5 If indeed you would exalt yourselves above me
and use my humiliation against me,
6 then know that God has **wronged** me and drawn his net around me.

Verse 6 is disturbing. Previously, the narrator said that *Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing* (1:22). That was a different Hebrew word, saying that Job did not impugn God's character. The word used here in verse 6 has to do with suppressing evidence in a legal context. Job is concerned that God does not seem to be following his case and sorting out the injustice.

What's bothering Job is that he's getting no help from his earthly friends and no help from God, no matter what he says:

Job 19:7-9 (NIV)

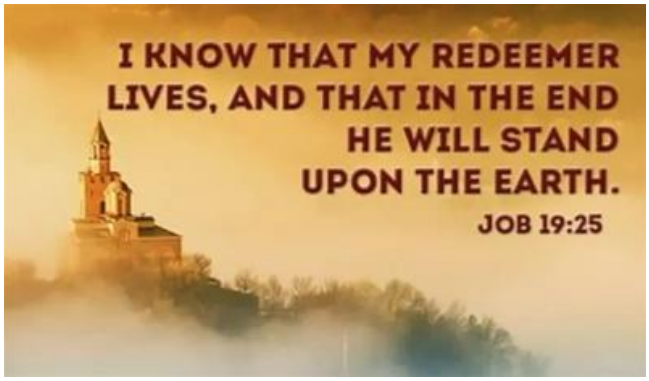
7 "Though I cry, 'Violence!' I get no response;
though I call for help, there is no justice.
8 He has blocked my way so I cannot pass;
he has shrouded my paths in darkness.
9 He has stripped me of my honour
and removed the crown from my head."

Job calls mercy instead of condemnation, from his friends and from God:

Job 19:21-27 (NIV)

21 "Have pity on me, my friends, have pity,
for the hand of God has struck me.
22 Why do you pursue me as God does?
Will you never get enough of my flesh?
23 "Oh, that my words were recorded, that they were written on a scroll,
24 that they were inscribed with an iron tool on lead,
or engraved in rock forever!

25 I know that my redeemer lives,
and that in the end he will stand
on the earth.
26 And after my skin has been destroyed,
yet in my flesh I will see God;
27 I myself will see him with my own
eyes— I, and not another.
How my heart yearns within me!



Verse 25 might be the most popular verse in Job for many Christians. We think of Jesus as our *Redeemer*, so we think of the incarnation, God standing on the earth. Some Christians have heard it that way since the fourth century.[19]

As we'll see in our final week, the Christ is the redeemer who sorts out the injustice we experience on earth. However, Job did not understand the incarnation or the cross:

> The New Testament unequivocally affirms that Christ is our mediator (1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 8:6; 9:15; 12:24), but we are not free to read even a true doctrine into any text we wish. We desire for our interpretation to reflect the authoritative teaching of the text, and the text cannot mean to us what it never meant to the author or audience.[20]

The *redeemer* (*g'l*) in Old Testament times, was the family member responsible for avenging blood (Numbers 35:19-27) or redeeming property (Leviticus 25:25). For example, Boaz redeemed Naomi's farm and family (Ruth 4:1-14).

Job yearns for such a person to stand up for him and restore all he has lost. He wants to see this in his lifetime. Although his *skin has been destroyed* (verse 26) as his body was *covered in painful sores from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head* (2:4-8), Job yearns to be restored before he dies. He wants to see God putting things right while he's physically alive, not after his life is over (verses 26-27).

Job concludes by warning his friends that the judgement they measure out against Job will be measured out against them:

Job 19:28-29 (NIV)

28 "If you say, 'How we will hound him,
since the root of the trouble lies in him,'
29 you should fear the sword yourselves;
for wrath will bring punishment by the sword,
and then you will know that there is judgment."

Job is right of course (see 42:7-9). But having their wisdom called into question upsets Zophar. He becomes even more judgemental against Job.

[19] Ephrem the Syrian, quoted in *Job*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (InterVarsity Press, 2006), 105.
[20] John H. Walton and Kelly Lemon Vizcaino, *NIV Application Commentary: Job*, (Zondervan, 2012), 225–226.

3.6 Zophar: Admit your guilt or you'll never be free (chapter 20)

Job 20:1-3 (NIV)

1 Then Zophar the Naamathite replied:

2 "My troubled thoughts prompt me to answer
because I am greatly disturbed.
3 I hear a rebuke that dishonours me,
and my understanding inspires me to reply."

Zophar affirms retribution theology, fully aware that in doing so he is condemning Job:

Job 20:4-7, 22-23 (NIV)

4 "Surely you know how it has been from of old,
ever since mankind 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 the pride of the godless person reaches to the heavens
and his head touches the clouds,
7 he will perish forever, like his own dung;
those who have seen him will say, 'Where is he?'" …

22 "In the midst of his plenty, distress will overtake him;
the full force of misery will come upon him.
23 When he has filled his belly,
God will vent his burning anger against him
and rain down his blows on him."

Zophar justifies his judgement of Job by interpreting Job's sufferings as evidence that God is exposing Job's guilt:

Job 20:27-29 (NIV)

27 "The heavens will expose his guilt;
the earth will rise up against him.
28 A flood will carry off his house,
rushing waters on the day of God's wrath.
29 Such is the fate God allots the wicked,
the heritage appointed for them by God."

3.7 Conclusion

Do you see what's happened in this second round of speeches?

Job's anguish is driving him towards God, as he desperately seeks help to argue the case that he does not deserve the suffering and loss he has experienced. But his friends reject Job's pleas of innocence. On the basis of their retribution theology, they pressure Job to admit his guilt, for he must be guilty if God is punishing him:

- **Eliphaz** says Job's claims that the world is unfair promotes ungodliness.
- **Bildad** says Job's sufferings are evidence of how wicked he is.
- **Zophar** tells him he will never be restored until he admits his guilt.

The narrator made it clear that interpreting suffering as punishment by God is wrong-headed. Job is *blameless and upright* (1:8). An accuser is testing whether people will keep trusting God when there are no benefits for doing so (1:9). In his pain, Job is pursuing God even harder, while his friends are making his life even harder by siding with the accuser.

With neither side giving in to the other, the debate between Job and his friends remains deadlocked, proving neither his innocence nor his guilt. Come back next week as we watch the third round of speeches fall into disarray (chapters 21–31).

Further reading

John Walton summarizes the second round of the dialogue:

> … the reasoning of this second sequence centres on the RP [Retribution Principle]. Each of the friends spends a major proportion of his speech affirming that the wicked demonstrably and inevitably suffer the judgment of God. The first series broached this topic, but turned it to a consideration of what Job could do to regain his benefits and favoured status. In this second series it is the very validity of the RP that is under discussion. After Job's friends have each elaborated on it at length, Job denies that the suffering of the wicked is either demonstrable or inevitable. The friends have argued for the integrity of a system; Job, convinced of his own integrity, rejects the system as spurious. This stands as the philosophical resolution to the second series and leads into the third, where accusation will replace insinuation.[21]

John Goldingay comments on "my redeemer" in 19:25:

> Job is not talking about the Messiah, though there is nothing odd about someone using Job's words to make a different point from the one Job made. …
>
> In the Old Testament, a "redeemer" is someone who belongs to your family but who has more resources or power than you have and is therefore in a position to help you when you are in need. One classic situation where the matter arises is where people are in trouble and are in danger of losing their land or their freedom. So God can use a person with resources as a redeemer, though it is possible for this person to forget and use the resources for self-aggrandizement. Thus Boaz is Ruth's redeemer, and God is Israel's redeemer, as God treats Israel as

[21] John H. Walton and Kelly Lemon Vizcaino, *NIV Application Commentary: Job*, (Zondervan, 2012), 225.

members of his family to whom he has family obligations. A redeemer's task is thus to take your side and take action in order to restore your situation to what it ought to be—hence I use the word "restorer." In this context Job is talking about someone who will restore the situation between him and God. God's hand has touched him in a heavy and negative sense. God pursues or persecutes him (and his friends do the same). And he doesn't know why. So he longs to see God in order that the two of them can sort things out in a meeting of God's assembly of the kind that opened the story. He has to allow for the possibility that in this meeting God will show him where he is in the wrong, but he is really convinced that he will be able to establish there that he is in the right. The role of his restorer will then be to facilitate that meeting and support Job when it happens. The kind of person Job is talking about is the kind of person he described in chapter 16 as his witness or advocate, a person to arbitrate for him with God.[22]

[22] John Goldingay, *Job for Everyone*, Old Testament for Everyone (SPCK, 2013), 98–99.