4 The third round (Job 21–31)

Job's sufferings are driving him to pursue God. If he could present his case before the heavenly court, he's convinced God would acquit him and overturn his misfortunes.

Job's friends, on the other hand, are convinced that Job is guilty. Otherwise God would be at fault, since they believe God always rewards the godly and punishes the wicked (retribution theology). To protect God's honour, they condemn Job.

Any questions on the previous chapters before we proceed?

4.1 Job: Does everyone get what they deserve? (chapter 21)

Job directly confronts the view that people always get what they deserve. He shows how retribution theology is not an accurate picture of life on earth:

Job 21:7-17 (NIV)

7 "Why do **the wicked** live on,
growing old and increasing in power?
8 They see their children established around them,
their offspring before their eyes.
9 Their homes are safe and free from fear;
the rod of God is not on them. …

14 "Yet they say to God, 'Leave us alone!
We have no desire to know your ways.
15 Who is the Almighty, that we should serve him?
What would we gain by praying to him?' …
17 "Yet how often is the lamp of the wicked snuffed out?
How often does calamity come upon them,
the fate God allots in his anger?"

Statistically, it's true that those who relate well and care for others end up with better relationships, while violent people are more likely to be distrusted by the community. But on a global scale, it's the powerful people who start the wars and force themselves on others. That was visible in all the kingdoms of the ancient world. Yet the Pharaohs and kings were worshipped by the throngs of people in awe of their power.

Job 21:27-34 (NIV)

27 "I know full well what you are thinking,
the schemes by which you would wrong me.
28 You say, 'Where now is the house of the great,
the tents where the wicked lived?'
29 Have you never questioned those who travel?
Have you paid no regard to their accounts—
30 that the wicked are spared from the day of calamity,
that they are delivered from the day of wrath?

31 Who denounces their conduct to their face?
Who repays them for what they have done?
32 They are carried to the grave, and watch is kept over their tombs.
33 The soil in the valley is sweet to them; everyone follows after them,
and a countless throng goes before them.
34 "So how can you console me with your nonsense?
Nothing is left of your answers but falsehood!"

In effect, Job is saying, "Don't tell me God gives everyone what they deserve."

4.2 Eliphaz: You're a wicked person, Job (chapter 22)

Eliphaz is frustrated that Job still claims his sufferings are undeserved. As John Goldingay puts it, "Eliphaz rewrites job's life rather than revise his own theology." [23]

Job 22:5-11 (NIV)

5 "**Is not your wickedness great?** Are not your sins endless?
6 You demanded security from your relatives for no reason;
you stripped people of their clothing, leaving them naked.
7 You gave no water to the weary
and you withheld food from the hungry,
8 though you were a powerful man, owning land—
an honoured man, living on it.
9 And you sent widows away empty-handed
and broke the strength of the fatherless.
10 That is why snares are all around you,
why sudden peril terrifies you,
11 why it is so dark you cannot see,
and why a flood of water covers you."

Eliphaz tells Job to admit his guilt so God will restore him:

Job 22:23-26 (NIV)

23 "If you return to the Almighty, you will be restored:
If you remove wickedness far from your tent …
24 and assign your nuggets to the dust,
your gold of Ophir to the rocks in the ravines,
25 then the Almighty will be your gold, the choicest silver for you.
26 Surely then you will find delight in the Almighty
and will lift up your face to God."

We still hear Eliphaz's lies today. People place the blame on the suffering person with comments such as, "If God seems far away, guess who moved?"

[23] John Goldingay, *Job for Everyone*, Old Testament for Everyone (SPCK, 2013), 109.

4.3 Job: I don't see justice in many places (chapters 23–24)

Job wants to present his case before the heavenly throne to prove his innocence and have God reverse his fortunes. But where do you go to find God and get justice?

Job 23:1-7 (NIV)

1 Then Job replied:
2 "Even today my complaint is bitter;
his hand is heavy in spite of my groaning.
3 If only I knew where to find him; if only I could go to his dwelling!
4 I would state my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments.
5 I would find out what he would answer me,
and consider what he would say to me.
6 Would he vigorously oppose me?
No, he would not press charges against me.
7 There the upright can establish their innocence before him,
and there I would be delivered forever from my judge."

Many people—both good and evil—do not get what they deserve, Job says:

Job 24:1-25 (NIV)

1 "Why does the Almighty not set times for judgment?
Why must those who know him look in vain for such days?
2 There are those who move boundary stones;
they pasture flocks they have stolen.
3 They drive away the orphan's donkey
and take the widow's ox in pledge.
4 They thrust the needy from the path
and force all the poor of the land into hiding. …
13 "There are those who rebel against the light,
who do not know its ways or stay in its paths.
14 When daylight is gone, the murderer rises up,
kills the poor and needy,
and in the night steals forth like a thief. …
25 "If this is not so, who can prove me false
and reduce my words to nothing?"

Can you see where Job is going with this? In his pain, he's firming his resolve to pursue God rather than run from God. As John Hartley says:

> His own sufferings have made him more sensitive to widespread human suffering. He longs for God to rectify matters on earth. … Job's concern for injustice leads him to challenge the theology of his day, but at the same time, because of his profound faith in God, his lamenting drives him to God for an answer.[24]

[24] John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job*, New International Commentary on the O.T. (Eerdmans, 1988), 354.

4.4 Bildad: Are you more righteous than God? (chapter 25)

The next presenter in the cycle is Bildad, but his speech is just six verses! Bildad is running out of patience with Job. Retribution is right, so Job is wrong, he says.

Bildad writes Job off as worthless:

Job 25 (NIV)

1 Then Bildad the Shuhite replied:

2 "Dominion and awe belong to God;
he establishes order in the heights of heaven.
3 Can his forces be numbered? On whom does his light not rise?
4 How then **can a mortal be righteous before God?**
How can one born of woman be pure?
5 If even the moon is not bright and the stars are not pure in his eyes,
6 how much less a mortal, who is but a maggot—
a human being, who is only a worm!"

Bildad wants to:

a) defend God's glory: *dominion and awe belong to God* (verse 2).
b) contrast God's righteousness with the inherent sinfulness of humanity: *can a mortal be righteous before God?* (verse 4).
c) condemn a person who claims to be righteous as merely *a maggot* feeding on decay (verse 6).

Bildad is still among us. Hymn writers ask us to sing that Christ died "for such as worm as I."[25] Theologians proclaim "total depravity," the belief that humans are so inherently evil that we cannot even ask God to save us. As early as AD 400, Augustine affirmed that, as Bildad put it, *no one born of woman is pure* (verse 4). He taught that every child is a sinner at birth (original sin), already condemned to hell unless baptized (since baptism washes away original sin for Augustine.)

That's at the root of the message of guilt and condemnation the church has delivered since then. Confessing your sins to a priest, performing your penance, and then receiving the freshly sacrificed Christ in the Mass was the message of the church in the Middle Ages. The Reformers realized we're not saved by works such as penance, but they still proclaimed Bildad's message of guilt. And today, Evangelicals still ask people to make a confession of personal guilt in order to be saved ("I am a sinner") instead of the gospel declaration of the Messiah's authority ("Jesus is Lord," compare Romans 10:9).

Whose message are we speaking? The Accuser? Or the Sovereign Saviour?

[25] Isaac Watts, *Alas! and Did My Saviour Bleed!* (1707).

4.5 Job: Who can understand God? (chapter 26)

Job 26:1-4 (NIV)

1 Then Job replied:
2 "How you have helped the powerless!
How you have saved the arm that is feeble!
3 What advice you have offered to one without wisdom!
And what great insight you have displayed!
4 Who has helped you utter these words?
And **whose spirit spoke from your mouth?**"

Job, you did hear the prologue? You did not hear the Satan accusing you of serving God for selfish reasons (Job 1:9-11), but you have discerned that Bildad is aligned with the spirit of the Satan, speaking the words of the accuser (verse 4).

If someone like Job turned up at church today, what message would you give them? Would you reject their claims to being a righteous person, insisting that no mortal can be righteous before God, that no one born of woman is pure? (25:4) If so, God may be saying, "You have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has" (Job 42:7).

The gospel does not call us to condemn people so they'll want a Saviour. The gospel is the good news that God raised up the ruler whom the world rejected and killed. The good news is that in the Messiah's leadership earth is restored as a kingdom of heaven.

As Bildad asked, *"Whose spirit speaks from your mouth?"* Do we proclaim a message of condemnation and guilt, like *the accuser of our brothers and sisters who accuses them before our God day and night*? Or do we proclaim *the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah* (Revelation 12:10).

Job turns away from the accusations of the Satan that he's hearing through Bildad. He affirms God's sovereign authority over creation, even when we don't understand it:

Job 26:10-14 (NIV)

10 "He marks out the horizon on the face of the waters
for a boundary between light and darkness.
11 The pillars of the heavens quake, aghast at his rebuke.
12 By his power he churned up the sea;
by his wisdom he cut Rahab to pieces.
13 By his breath the skies became fair;
his hand pierced the gliding serpent.
14 And these are but the outer fringe of his works;
how faint the whisper we hear of him!
Who then can understand the thunder of his power?"

Some commentators regard 26:5-14 as the words of the narrator, with 27:1 marking the moment Job resumes his discourse.[26] Whether the speaker is Job or the narrator,

[26] For example, John Goldingay, *Job for Everyone*, Old Testament for Everyone (SPCK, 2013), 125.

our attention is being drawn to our heavenly sovereign. Earth is established by God's decrees (verse 10), with heaven as the authority over us (verse 11). God rules over what we cannot control: the forces of the sea (verse 12) and the air (verse 13). Truly, what we perceive is merely a whisper of God's thunderous authority (verse 14).

4.6 Job: Retribution has a place (chapter 27)

In the previous rounds, Zophar followed Eliphaz and Bildad as they all tried to convince Job he was wrong to reject retribution theology. In this third round, Zophar makes no appearance. Does his silence mean he's given up on Job?

Job fills the silence. He's still insisting that God has not given him what he deserves:

Job 27:1-6 (NIV)

1 And Job continued his discourse:
2 "As surely as God lives, who has denied me justice,
the Almighty, who has made my life bitter,
3 as long as I have life within me, the breath of God in my nostrils,
4 my lips will not say anything wicked, and my tongue will not utter lies.
5 I will never admit you are in the right; till I die,
I will not deny my integrity.
6 I will maintain my innocence and never let go of it;
my conscience will not reproach me as long as I live."

The rest of Chapter 27 almost sounds like Job agreeing to retribution theology:

Job 27:11-15 (NIV)

11 "I will teach you about the power of God;
the ways of the Almighty I will not conceal.
12 You have all seen this yourselves. Why then this meaningless talk?
13 "Here is the fate God allots to the wicked,
the heritage a ruthless man receives from the Almighty:
14 However many his children, their fate is the sword;
his offspring will never have enough to eat.
15 The plague will bury those who survive him,
and their widows will not weep for them."

Some scholars wonder if this is Zophar speaking unannounced, asking Job, *"Why then all this meaningless talk?"* (verse 12).[27] It's probably better to hear Job admitting that the wicked in general do suffer, even though that's not the way it works in every individual case. As John Walton says:

> Job now returns to a discussion of God's interaction with the wicked (27:13–23). Unlike his previous treatment of this topic (24:18–24), Job here specifically mentions God's retributive action (though God is only named in v. 13). Still, in this context, Job only speaks of a general fate

[27] David J. A. Clines, *Job 21–37*, Word Biblical Commentary (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2006), 908.

allotted by God, not a specific act of judgment; thus, he does not contradict his statement in 24:12. [28]

4.7 Hymn to wisdom (chapter 28)

Western Australia's economy is driven by mining. It's big business, but ordinary people spend their lives fossicking for nuggets too. Finding precious metals begins with learning where to look. But where do you look for wisdom?

Job 28:1-3 (NIV)

[1] There is a mine for silver and a place where gold is refined.
[2] Iron is taken from the earth, and copper is smelted from ore.
[3] Mortals put an end to the darkness; they search out the farthest recesses for ore in the blackest darkness. …

The right question is, "**Who** is the source of wisdom?"

Job 28:20-28 (NIV)

[20] Where then does wisdom come from?
Where does understanding dwell? …
[23] God understands the way to it
and he alone knows where it dwells,
[24] for he views the ends of the earth
and sees everything under the heavens. …
[28] And he said to the human race,
"The fear of the Lord—that is wisdom,
and to shun evil is understanding."

Like tracing a seam of gold back to its source, the search for wisdom leads us to the one whose wisdom established the heavens and the earth, the heights and the depths, the people and the creatures who live because he gave us life. The knowledge of good and evil belongs to him; it's not whatever I think is good for me.

The NIV calls this chapter an "interlude." This hymn is nestled between the dialogues we've heard so far (Job 3–27) and the monologues we hear in the rest of the book (Job 29–41). It reminds us that the source of wisdom is not in our own understanding but the heart of God. Job's words begin again in the next chapter where the text says, *Job continued his discourse* (29:1).

John Hartley understands Job 28 like this:

> This hymn comes at the end of the disturbed third cycle. Since its abstract, reflective tone does not match well any of the speakers, it is taken to be a piece that stands outside the dialogue. It functions as a bridge between the dialogue and the groups of speeches that are coming.[29]

[28] John H. Walton and Kelly Lemon Vizcaino, *NIV Application Commentary: Job*, (Zondervan, 2012), 261–262.
[29] John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job*, New International Commentary on the O.T. (Eerdmans, 1988), 373.

4.8 Job: how can I get justice? (chapters 29–31)

Job 29:1-5 (NIV)

1 Job continued his discourse:
2 "How I long for the months gone by,
for the days when God watched over me,
3 when his lamp shone on my head
and by his light I walked through darkness!
4 Oh, for the days when I was in my prime,
when God's intimate friendship blessed my house,
5 when the Almighty was still with me
and my children were around me …"

Job remembers the honour he had when people regarded him as *the greatest man among all the people of the East* (1:3):

Job 29:21-25 (NIV)

21 "People listened to me expectantly,
waiting in silence for my counsel.
22 After I had spoken, they spoke no more;
my words fell gently on their ears.
23 They waited for me as for showers
and drank in my words as the spring rain.
24 When I smiled at them, they scarcely believed it;
the light of my face was precious to them.
25 I chose the way for them and sat as their chief;
I dwelt as a king among his troops;
I was like one who comforts mourners."

Now Job is the mourner who needs comforting. Loss of honour is Job's greatest grief:

Job 30 (NIV)

1 "But now they mock me, men younger than I …
16 "And now my life ebbs away; days of suffering grip me.
17 Night pierces my bones; my gnawing pains never rest. …
20 "I cry out to you, God, but you do not answer;
I stand up, but you merely look at me.
21 You turn on me ruthlessly;
with the might of your hand you attack me."

Job's friends say God has it in for him because he's evil. His sins are endless (21:5). He'd take the shirt off your back (21:6). He'd withhold food from the hungry (22:7), send widows away empty-handed (21:9), and break the strength of orphans (21:9). According to Eliphaz, Job deserves everything God has given him because he treads the path of the wicked (21:15).

Job responds by calling down curses if he's not telling the truth:

Job 31 (NIV)

5 "If I have walked with falsehood or my foot has hurried after deceit …
9 "If my heart has been enticed by a woman …
13 "If I have denied justice to any of my servants …
16 "If I have denied the desires of the poor
or let the eyes of the widow grow weary …
24 "If I have put my trust in gold …
29 "If I have rejoiced at my enemy's misfortune …
36 "Surely I would wear it on my shoulder,
I would put it on like a crown.
37 I would give him an account of my every step;
I would present it to him as to a ruler.
38 "If my land cries out against me and all its furrows are wet with tears,
39 if I have devoured its yield without payment
or broken the spirit of its tenants,
40 then let briers come up instead of wheat
and stinkweed instead of barley."
The words of Job are ended.

This is the end of Job's dialogue with his friends to find the reason for his sufferings. There is no reason, he asserts. He deserves none of the grief and loss he has endured. If justice means getting what we deserve, then justice has not been done.

His friends have not restored his honour. Job's only hope is to have his case heard in the heavenly court:

Job 31:35 (NIV)

"Oh, that I had someone to hear me!
I sign now my defence—let the Almighty answer me;
let my accuser put his indictment in writing."

Would the Almighty who reigns over heaven and earth be interested in hearing Job's case? Would the prosecutor who is pressing the case against Job be willing to submit a written accusation of Job's crimes that could be tested in court?

That's Job's challenge. Of course, we already know the heavenly court is very aware of Job's innocence (1:8). His persistent faith in the face of such loss is the answer to the false accusation that Job serves God only for the benefits (1:9).

4.9 Conclusion

In this third round of speeches, Eliphaz accused Job of being a wicked person. Bildad treated Job as a maggot. Zophar gave up on him. Wisdom is not found in the human heart where justice is understood as retribution. Wisdom is found in God, the source

of everything in heaven and on earth, the God whose majestic heart extends beyond what we value. And God's wisdom delivers a justice that's not what we expect.

Will Job get the opportunity to present his case before the Almighty? We'll learn the answer to that question next week as we hear the concluding chapters of this astounding wisdom drama (Job 32–42).

Further reading

John Hartley explains how Job kept his faith in the face of tragedy:

> Job's last speech is a masterpiece. He recounts his former honour (ch. 29), mourns his humiliation (ch. 30), and then swears an oath of innocence (ch. 31). His confidence has grown so strong that he enumerates specific sins that he has not done, under threat of a terrible curse should he be lying. He has lived by the highest moral standard, concerned not only with his acts but more importantly with his attitudes and motives. Job has had regard for the dignity of all people, be they nobles, servants, or foreigners, and his affection for God survives underneath his complaints.
>
> The clarity of Job's conviction reveals that he has risen above his deep despair as expressed in his curse-lament (ch. 3). Even though his pain has not lessened, he has been able to give form to his thoughts. By verbally lamenting his bitterest feelings, he has not let the bitterness and anger of his sorrow drive him to utter despair. He gives focus to his frustration by addressing God as his opponent. Complaining to God about his wretched condition keeps him from falling into subjective disorientation. Although frustrated at God's apparent hostility, Job has, throughout the dialogue, kept a high view of God in his thinking by reciting hymnic lines in praise of God. Now he rests his case with God, believing that in the end God will do justice by him.
>
> In these chapters Job is a model of how the human spirit can struggle against all aspects of suffering—physical, emotional, social, spiritual—and sustain a search for God while God remains hidden. The ability to express genuine faith under extreme duress enables the human spirit to bear the severest tragedy and prevail. Job disciplines his thoughts and his emotions as he demands an answer from God. Since God is the supreme ruler, Job has nowhere to turn but to God, with the hope that God will answer him. If God does answer him, his experience will prove that every misfortune can have a redemptive outcome. To cope with a hard, trying experience, the afflicted must keep his focus on God in order not to compromise his confidence in God. Such persistent faith will strengthen the bond between God and the afflicted. Evil will never triumph over a person who trusts in God.[30]

[30] John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job*, New International Commentary on the O.T. (Eerdmans, 1988), 426.