

Eliphaz and Job: The First Dialogue
Job 4–7

Turn to Job 4 please. The book of Job is the story of a man who was faithful to God and had terrible troubles, one right after another. He lost all his property, he lost all his children, and he lost his health. That all happens in Job 1–2. Job is 42 chapters long, and in the rest of the book we listen to different people try to sort out what part God plays in this.

We all have some kind of trouble and suffering, and when God’s children have ongoing difficulties, we actually have two problems. One is whatever is wrong, our health or some other difficulty. The other problem is God, that is, what does God think about this? Why does God allow this? Why is he not talking it away?

The book of Job is about the God problem. In Job 4–31 we have the dialogues, conversations between Job and his friends. Job’s three friends each tell Job what’s going on between Job and God, and then Job responds to that friend, and then the second friend has a go at it, and Job responds to the second friend, and then the third friend explains what God’s doing, and Job responds. The three friends are Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar.

And then they all do it again, and then they begin a third time. But half way through the third series Job has had enough of his friends. Job cuts off Bildad’s third speech after a few lines.

Here’s the thing: Job’s friends all think Job has brought this on himself. Job must have some kind of big sin in his life, some failure to live in God’s ways. It’s Job’s fault that God has turned against him. We know from the first two chapters that this is not true. God himself said, “There is no one like Job, blameless and upright.” His friends are sure that it’s Job’s spiritual problem.

A big part of this book is us listening to faithful godly friends giving the normal Christian explanations for Job’s trouble, and we know that it’s all wrong. Lots of what they say is right, for sure, but as advice for Job, it is completely wrong and inappropriate. And Job knows this. Job does not think he’s sinless, but he knows it would have to be a great sin to bring such great suffering, and he knows there’s no sin like that in his life, and we know that too.

Today we’ll take the first speech and response as a sample. Eliphaz speaks first, he seems to be the leader of the three, so we’ll look at his speech, and we’ll look at how Job responds, to give the flavour of these conversations. We’ll talk more in other sermons about what Job says, but this is the closest we’ll look at what his friends say. They all say much the same.

Part I will be what Eliphaz says, in Job 4–5, and part II will be what Job says in Job 6–7.

Part I: Eliphaz – People Reap What They Sow – Job 4–5

We'll read three sections from Eliphaz

Eliphaz #1 – We Reap what We Sow – Job 4:7–9

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

Those who plow evil and sow trouble reap it. That's the core of Eliphaz's view. There much truth in the line that people reap what they sow. The Bible often says things like that. But as an explanation for Job's suffering, it is just plain wrong and therefore also cruel.

Eliphaz #2: People Produce their Own Trouble – Job 5:3–7

*I myself have seen a fool taking root, but suddenly his house was cursed.
His children are far from safety, crushed in court without a defender.
The hungry consume his harvest, taking it even from among thorns,
and the thirsty pant after his wealth.
For hardship does not spring from the soil, nor does trouble sprout from the ground.
Rather man breeds trouble for himself, as surely as sparks fly upward. (NCB, NCV)*

Most translations say “man is *born* to trouble,” but the word “born” and the word “beget” or “cause birth” are almost exactly the same word in Hebrew, and “beget” or “breed” works better here, as a few translations have done.

Eliphaz asks, Where do people's troubles come from? Do people's troubles spring up from the soil? No. Do they sprout from the ground? No. People breed their own trouble, people produce their own trouble. In other words, “Job, it's your own fault that your children died.”

Eliphaz #3: If you Repent, Job, God will Bless and Protect You – Job 5:17–27

*Blessed is the one whom God corrects; so do not despise the discipline of the Almighty.
For he wounds, but he also binds up; he injures, but his hands also heal.
From six calamities he will rescue you; in seven no harm will touch you.
In famine he will deliver you from death, and in battle from the stroke of the sword.
You will be protected from the lash of the tongue, and need not fear when destruction comes.
You will laugh at destruction and famine, and need not fear the wild animals.
For you will have a covenant with the stones of the field, and the wild animals will be at peace with you. You will know that your tent is secure;
you will take stock of your property and find nothing missing.
You will know that your children will be many, and your descendants like the grass of the earth.
You will come to the grave in full vigor, like sheaves gathered in season.
We have examined this, and it is true. So hear it and apply it to yourself.*

Did you catch the last few lines? Job, your property will be safe, your children will be safe, and you will be healthy yourself until the day you die! Property, children, and health – those are exactly what Job lost. Eliphaz says that if he would take his troubles as the Lord’s correction, he’d be blessed with protection and bounty in property, and children, and health.

The frightening thing is how much good biblical truth there is in the speech of Eliphaz, how much he has right. The Bible says all these things. And yet we know from Job 1–2 that Eliphaz has completely missed the mark. We know that Job’s troubles did not come from any failure on Job’s part. We’re listening to a good man, Eliphaz, give good Christian explanations for Job’s suffering, and we know from Job 1–2 that he’s entirely wrong.

I have read books and web sites and heard speakers who trace all kinds of troubles back to some spiritual problem, something wrong between the troubled person and God. I’m talking about money problems and health problems and emotional problems with how our minds work. They all say that if we would trust and follow God in the right way, these things would not happen, and if we get it right, our troubles will go away.

The book of Job throws that all into the dumpster. That’s what Job’s friends did to Job, and at the end of Job God was angry with his friends. Listen to God in Job 42: *The Lord said 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.... My servant Job will pray for you, and I will accept his prayer and not deal with you according to your folly. You have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has.” So Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar did what the Lord told them; and the Lord accepted Job’s prayer.* Job 42:7-9

Many Christians have continued the same foolishness as Job’s friends, and have left a trail of discouraged sufferers in their wake. Do this and God will cure you, the preachers say. But it does not work, and then their pain is even greater. God is no happier about this recent foolishness than he was about the ancient foolishness. Job’s troubles came from a decision made in heaven, and there was nothing he could have done to prevent it. It would happen, period.

Job does *not* teach that we never bring troubles on ourselves. Sometimes we do. ****Job does teach this: that when we see great troubles, we may *not* assume the suffering person brought this on themselves. We may *not* assume we know how they can make it better. We may *not* assume we know what God is doing.****

Part II Job’s Response to Eliphaz – Job 6–7

Job #1: Will you not Consider my Great Anguish? – 6:2–4

*If only my anguish could be weighed and all my misery be placed on the scales!
It would surely outweigh the sand of the seas—no wonder my words have been impetuous.*

*The arrows of the Almighty are in me, my spirit drinks in their poison;
God's terrors are marshaled against me.*

Job does not want answers or explanations or guidance. He knows he's speaking rashly. "No wonder my words are impetuous." He's beside himself with pain and grief. He wants his friends to grasp his pain and sympathize and at least try to comfort him.

This is the first place that Job holds God directly responsible for his troubles: "The arrows of the Almighty are in me, my spirit drinks in their poison. God's terrors are marshaled against me." Job will often hold God directly responsible for his troubles.

I was taught to say that God *allowed* troubles that come, but I should never *blame* God for bad things. But in the Bible, Job and Lamentations and the lament psalms regularly blame God for troubles. "You did this to me. You brought this into my life." In the Bible, God is never offended that people hold him responsible for hard things in their lives. Whether we deserve our troubles or not, the Bible gives us full freedom to hold God responsible. That's called "faith," and God never corrects anyone for doing that, whether we deserved it or not.

Job #2: I Wish God would Take my Life – 6:8–10

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

This just repeats what Job said in chapter 3, and Job speaks like this several times.

Job #3: You are Undependable Friends, Afraid of the Truth 6:14–21, 24–25

*Anyone who withholds kindness from a friend forsakes the fear of the Almighty.
But my brothers are as undependable as intermittent streams, as the streams that overflow
when darkened by thawing ice and swollen with melting snow,
but that stop flowing in the dry season, and in the heat vanish from their channels.
Caravans turn aside from their routes; they go off into the wasteland and perish.
The caravans of Tema look for water, the traveling merchants of Sheba look in hope.
They are distressed, because they had been confident; they arrive there, only to be disappointed.
Now you too have proved to be of no help; you see something dreadful and are afraid...
Teach me, and I will be quiet; show me where I have been wrong. How painful are honest words!*

You see something dreadful and are afraid, says Job. How painful are honest words, says Job. Job's three friends have seen terrible things happen to their good friend Job. And they know Job is a very good man. And Job says he's done nothing wrong. "Show me where I've been wrong."

They are really unsettled by what they have seen. They're working harder to make sense of this than to be a good friend to Job. They're working harder to have answers than to comfort Job. They are working harder to defend God than to take care of Job.

He wants them to care for him, and they want to correct him. What’s worse, he knows their correction is wrong. Job is not asking his friends for answers, and he’s not asking them to make it better. He hopes for compassion. He wants them to lament with him, to weep with those who weep. And he does not get that from his friends.

When we sit beside someone in great pain that we cannot change, *we* are distressed, and this causes its own kind of anguish in *us*. *We* are frightened and pained by *their* suffering. We want an answer to *their* pain that will make *our* pain less. That’s normal, but it’s not good for them. God made us to be distressed by their pain, that’s a good thing, God does this so we’ll care for them.

But when we cannot help them, which is often enough, then we do things so that *we* feel better. We’re hard on them, or we avoid them, so *we* don’t feel so bad. We want to feel better ourselves. And you can be sure that I’ve done this myself. I need to make sure *my* discomfort with their pain does not make me less kind to *them*.

Job #4: Job’s Physical Suffering – 7:4–5

When I lie down I think, ‘How long before I get up?’ The night drags on, and I toss and turn until dawn. My body is clothed with worms and scabs, my skin is broken and festering. Earlier in this speech Job said, “no wonder my words have been impetuous.”

In Job 1, Job lost all property and all his children. In Job 2, he lost his health, and the story tells us that physical pain is a particularly severe test. Once, long ago, I had a small boil, and it was amazingly painful. Boils from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head.

Job #5: I Despise my Life, I Wish to Die – 7:15–16

[Job says to God:] *I prefer strangling and death, rather than this body of mine. I despise my life; I would not live forever. Let me alone; my days have no meaning.*

Job despises his life. His whole life, he believes, is meaningless, a waste. He says this a few times, beginning in Job 3. This is one of the things Job repents of in Job 42.

Job #6: God, Why Have you Made Me your Target? Please Look Away – 7:19–21

*Will you never look away from me, or let me alone even for an instant?
If I have sinned, what have I done to you, you who see everything we do?
Why have you made me your target? Have I become a burden to you?
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.”*

Job never says he’s sinless. He knows he has sinned, but he also knows that he done no sin great enough to bring this kind of trouble on himself.

For some reason that Job does not understand, God made Job his target. So Job pleads with God to look somewhere else. He has not damaged God, has he? Could God not look away and leave him alone?

No wonder Job's friends were uncomfortable. We are uncomfortable. This is not how sermons are supposed to end! But we need to understand: Job was written to make godly people uncomfortable. We are supposed to see how we are like Job's friends.

On the other hand, if you follow God and have great pain in your life, the book of Job is good, it brings relief. It's good news because a book of the Bible is telling your story, with all the questions and mess included, and it does not mince words. So honest. It includes the people you thought were your friends but who have somehow turned away from you. Job is a kind word from God for those who identify with Job.

Job #7: Job's Confidence in God (Job's Perseverance) 16:18 – 17:4

Job still has underlying confidence in God. Ten chapters later Job says:

Even now my witness is in heaven; my advocate is on high.

My intercessor is my friend as my eyes pour out tears to God;

on behalf of a man he pleads with God as one pleads for a friend...

You must defend my innocence, O God, since no one else will stand up for me.

You have closed [my friends'] minds to understanding; therefore you will not let them triumph.

God had become Job's enemy, attacking Job for reasons he does not understand. Even so, all Job could do in this was turn to God. He could not stop having faith in God. At some level God was still his advocate and friend. Job knew there was only one witness who knew the truth about him, one witness who knew the friends were wrong, and that was God in heaven. Job poured out his grief to God because he was sure God would come to his defense. In that Job was right.

Job did not always talk like this. In some ways he was all over the place, as is common when we are in pain. But he knew his friends were not right about him and God, and he knew that God would not let that rest. Sooner or later God would make clear that this was not Job's fault, and Job counted on that. *Job would not turn away from God, he would not stop appealing to God. That's faith, and that's perseverance. Amen.*

PRAYER: Father, equip us with everything good for doing your will, and work in us what pleases you. Fill us with knowing your will, so that we will walk worthy of Christ and always please him. Thank you that you rescued us from the authority of darkness, and that you're in the business of answering prayers like this. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and into Christ's perseverance. May the Lord of peace give you peace at all times and in every way. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.