



Job - Chapter Four

II Job 3:1-42:6 - Dialogue: Job, His Suffering, and His Standing before God (continues)

Summary of Chapter Four

Eliphaz starts this phase of the dialogue by reminding Job that he has often counselled others in their times of trouble but now he seems to have forgotten his fear of God and the humility he should show before him. He poses the first really important questions to Job in his dilemma: <<*Can mortals be righteous before God? Can human beings be pure before their Maker?*>> (v.17).

II.b Job 4:1-25:6 - The Friends and Job: Can Job be Right Before God?

The main section of the book contains the dialogue between Job and the three friends that opens with Job's initial lament (Job 3:1-16) and then alternates between speeches by each friend Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, followed by the corresponding responses by Job. The dialogue consists of two full cycles containing a speech by each friend and response by Job; refer to Job 4:1-14:22 and 15:1-21:34. Job appears to cut off Bildad in the midst of his third speech (Job 22:1-25:6), which is followed by a lengthy section of Job's final argument (Job 26:1-31:40). In his opening response, Eliphaz initiates what will become a recurring question and theme for the speeches of the friends: <<*Can mortals be righteous before God? Can human beings be pure before their Maker?*>> (v.17); refer also to Job 9:2, 15:14 and 25:4. The friends assume that both Job's circumstances and his response to them are indications that he is in the wrong before God and needs to acknowledge and repent of his sin. However, Job will insist not only that he is not guilty of some hidden iniquity but that it is God who ultimately has allowed and governed his circumstances.

II.b.i [Job 4:1-14:22 - The First Cycle](#)

Although Eliphaz begins this round of dialogues with a fairly gentle tone (vv.3-4), sympathy for Job rapidly fades. The character of Job is consistently probed under the assumption that his moral failures account for his present plight, first by Eliphaz in Chapters 4-5, then by Bildad in Chapter 8, and finally by Zophar in Chapter 11. Job responds in kind: bewildered by his suffering, he angrily argues (Chapters 6-7), legally disputes (Chapters 9-10), and resolutely rejects (Chapters 12-14) the counsel of his friends.

II.b.i.1 [Job 4:1-5:27 - Eliphaz: Can Mortal Man be in the Right Before God?](#)

Eliphaz opens his first response with a brief affirmation of Job's character (vv.2-4), before asserting what he knows to be true about how God works (4:7-5:16), and articulating the core of the friends' argument: in light of Job's circumstance, he cannot be in the right before God (v.17). In light of his confidence that his description and inferences are correct, Eliphaz suggests that Job accept his circumstance as God's reproof in order that he might be delivered (5:17-27). When the dialogue with the three friends is finished, Elihu will suggest something quite similar to Eliphaz, even if he takes a slightly different approach; refer to Job 32:1-37:24 particularly 36:7-21.

II.b.i.1.A [Job 4:1-21 - Eliphaz Speaks: Job Has Sinned](#)

Refer to the chapter summary above.

¹ Then Eliphaz the Temanite answered:

² 'If one ventures a word with you, will you be offended?

 But who can keep from speaking?

³ See, you have instructed many;

 you have strengthened the weak hands.

⁴ Your words have supported those who were stumbling,

 and you have made firm the feeble knees.

⁵ But now it has come to you, and you are impatient;

 it touches you, and you are dismayed.

⁶ Is not your fear of God your confidence,

 and the integrity of your ways your hope?

Job 4:1-6

Then Eliphaz the Temanite answered. Eliphaz was from Teman, an Edomite city that was known as a centre of wisdom: <<*Is there no longer wisdom in Teman? Has counsel perished from the prudent? Has their wisdom vanished?*>> (Jeremiah 49:7b).

If one ventures a word with you, will you be offended? With this tactful beginning, Eliphaz began his speech. It can be argued that he had earned the right to speak to Job because, in a remarkable display of friendship, he sat wordless with Job through an entire week to show his sympathy and brotherhood with the afflicted man; refer to Job 2:11-13.

But who can keep from speaking? Eliphaz felt compelled to speak; his love and concern for Job strongly motivated him to help his suffering friend. Nevertheless, it will be later found that the advice of Eliphaz and the rest of Job's counsellors was wrong: <<*After the Lord had spoken these words to Job, the Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite: 'My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. Now therefore take seven bulls and seven rams, and go to my servant Job, and offer up for yourselves a burnt-offering; and my servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has done'*>> (Job 42:7-8).

See, you have instructed many; but now it has come to you, and you are impatient. Eliphaz began to confront Job with what he saw as his problem. This took a great deal of courage on the part of Eliphaz; he was the first one to speak, and he spoke to a man with an enviable reputation for godliness and one suffering from terrible calamity. Yet he pointed at this apparent contradiction in Job's lament recorded in the previous chapter: That this man who had taught and comforted many in their time of need now seems to despair in his own time of need and difficulty.

Job was a highly respected man in his own community and it is natural that he should have been a teacher, probably referring to matters of faith, morality and general lifestyle. The people could soak up his words for their own benefits: <<*May my teaching drop like the rain, my speech condense like the dew; like gentle rain on grass, like showers on new growth*>> (Deuteronomy 32:2), and: <<*They waited for me as for the rain; they opened their mouths as for the spring rain*>> (Job 29:23).

You have strengthened the weak hands. Job's teaching had been about encouraging those who were downhearted: <<*How you have helped one who has no power! How you have assisted the arm that has no strength!*>> (Job 26:2),

<<Do not cast me off in the time of old age; do not forsake me when my strength is spent>> (Psalm 71:9), <<Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees>> (Isaiah 35:3), <<On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak>> (Zephaniah 3:16), and: <<Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees>> (Hebrews 12:12).

Is not your fear of God your confidence. This has the idea of, “Job, does not your despair show that you have lost confidence in your reverence before God and lost hope in the integrity of your ways?”

This begins a section where Eliphaz and the others will try to make Job see that his problems have come upon him because of some sin on his part, and that he should confess and repent of his sin in order to be restored. Eliphaz began on the basis of Job’s complaint as recorded in Job Chapter 3. He reasoned that Job would not complain in this way unless he was in some way guilty; that his guilty conscience was the root of his suffering. As it turned out, this was a false assumption. Job’s complaint was simply the cry of a life in pain and not because Job consciously or unconsciously understood that he deserved this calamity because of his sin.

7 ‘Think now, who that was innocent ever perished?

Or where were the upright cut off?

8 As I have seen, those who plough iniquity
and sow trouble reap the same.

9 By the breath of God they perish,
and by the blast of his anger they are consumed.

10 The roar of the lion, the voice of the fierce lion,
and the teeth of the young lions are broken.

11 The strong lion perishes for lack of prey,
and the whelps of the lioness are scattered.

Job 4:7-11

Who that was innocent ever perished? Here Eliphaz came to the heart of his argument. He boldly said that Job was guilty of some sin because the innocent do not suffer as he had, and the upright are not cut off as he was: *<<No harm happens to the righteous, but the wicked are filled with trouble>> (Proverbs 12:21), and: <<(for that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by their lawless deeds that he saw and heard),*

then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trial, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgement>> (2 Peter 2:8-9). In this context, cut off means forsaken by God and goodness; in Israel later it would often mean to be executed or removed from the community of God's people.

Those who plough iniquity and sow trouble reap the same. At the opening of his speech, Eliphaz states the dictum that the friends will relentlessly defend throughout the dialogue. For them this proverb is unequivocal – it is true in all circumstances in the same way. Character can be judged by circumstances. Eliphaz spoke convincingly from his own experience, i.e. as I have seen. Job was reaping trouble, so he must have ploughed sin, that is, iniquity, and sown the seeds of trouble. The counsel of Eliphaz is full of common sense and rooted in his own observations and experience. It might even be said that it is mostly true and can be commonly seen as true. Nevertheless, it is also known that in Job's case he was wrong and this was the false counsel, remembering God's assessment of Eliphaz and Job's counsellors in Job 42:7.

Many people today believe the counsel of Eliphaz, and believe it as an absolute spiritual law instead of a general principle. Some take the passage: <<*Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow*>> (Galatians 6:7). Yet it is important to understand the context of Paul's statement, which was encouragement and exhortation for Christians to give materially for the support of their ministers. It is true that the principle of Galatians 6:7 has application beyond giving and supporting teachers and ministers. It has a general application in life; what one gets out of life is often related to what they put in to it. Yet Paul did not promote some law of spiritual karma that ensures people will receive good when they do good things or always receive bad when they do bad things. If there were such an absolute spiritual law it would surely damn everyone! Instead, Paul simply related the principle of sowing and reaping to the way in which resources are managed before the Lord. He used a similar image in 1 Corinthians 9:11 and 2 Corinthians 9:6-10.

By the breath of God they perish, and by the blast of his anger they are consumed. Here, Eliphaz clearly implied that Job's suffering came as the judgement of God against him; that the blast of his anger burned against Job. The idea is also that the mere breath of God's anger is enough to destroy God's enemies or any that sin against him: <<*And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will destroy with the breath of his mouth, annihilating him by the manifestation of his coming*>> (2 Thessalonians 2:8).

The roar of the lion, the voice of the fierce lion, and the teeth of the young lions are broken. Typical of wisdom exponents, Eliphaz turns to nature to demonstrate his truth. Even an animal as mighty as the lion is incapable of altering the operation of natural law to protect its own young. A man like Job cannot alter the function of moral law any more than the lion can alter natural law. Eliphaz

painted the picture of how strong the anger of God is; that it is strong enough to humble and defeat even strong young lions. The idea is that the anger of God has also brought Job low.

- 12 'Now a word came stealing to me,
my ear received the whisper of it.
- 13 Amid thoughts from visions of the night,
when deep sleep falls on mortals,
- 14 dread came upon me, and trembling,
which made all my bones shake.
- 15 A spirit glided past my face;
the hair of my flesh bristled.
- 16 It stood still,
but I could not discern its appearance.
A form was before my eyes;
there was silence, then I heard a voice:
- 17 "Can mortals be righteous before God?
Can human beings be pure before their Maker?
- 18 Even in his servants he puts no trust,
and his angels he charges with error;
- 19 how much more those who live in houses of clay,
whose foundation is in the dust,
who are crushed like a moth.
- 20 Between morning and evening they are destroyed;
they perish for ever without any regarding it.
- 21 Their tent-cord is plucked up within them,
and they die devoid of wisdom."

Job 4:12-21

Now a word came stealing to me. Eliphaz claimed that he received this word in a dream, i.e. when deep sleep falls on mortals, and he received it by a spirit that passed ephemerally before his face in his dream.

Can mortals be righteous before God? The opening questions of v.17 present an interpretative difficulty: what do they mean and what is their function in the dialogue? Are they Eliphaz's way of reminding Job that all creation has been affected by sin? Are they Job's questions asking whether it is possible to live in such a manner as to receive only good things from God? Neither of these possibilities appears fully satisfying: the first because Eliphaz would then be arguing that what has happened to Job is a consequence that should be expected by all people, including himself; the second because it is not the purpose of Job's lament to ask whether it would have been possible so to live as to avoid his circumstances. Eliphaz called attention to the common sinfulness of man. The idea is clear: "Job, we all sin. There is no great shame in admitting that you have sinned and that is why this calamity has come upon you."

Humankind is essentially sinful, opposing God in all sorts of ways, whether they are intentional or not. Many scriptures reveal this: <<Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me>> (Psalm 51:5), <<Who can say, 'I have made my heart clean; I am pure from my sin?>> (Proverbs 20:9), <<Surely there is no one on earth so righteous as to do good without ever sinning>> (Ecclesiastes 7:20), and: <<Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our ancestors?>> (Malachi 2:10).

The apostle Paul also makes this point but also offers great hope: <<For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith>> (Romans 3:22b-25a).

A literary key for answering the question is found in the function of the prologue. The content of the heavenly dialogues (Job 1:8 and 2:3), and the comments of the narrator (Job 1:1-5, 1:22 and 2:10), place the evaluation of Job's character at the forefront for interpreting the book as a whole.

In the dialogue of Chapters 3-31, the friends are seeking to judge the nature of the very thing to which the reader has been made privy: God's evaluation of Job. The tension of the dialogue begins with Eliphaz's vision, which functions as a response to Job's initial lament in Job 3:1-26: "How can you presume that you are in the right?" Eliphaz argues that if even angels are found at fault before God, then the fact of compounded and devastating suffering should lead

Job, a mortal man, to seek God for help rather than presuming the right to protest against him: <<As for me, I would seek God, and to God I would commit my cause>> (Job 5:8).

Eliphaz follows the opening question to Job with an extended description to illustrate his greater-to-lesser argument. If angels are held guilty, i.e. his angels he charges with error, then how much more so are mortals who live in houses of clay, perish for ever without any regarding it: <<Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes>> (James 4:14), and who die devoid of wisdom?

Eliphaz made this interesting comment to point out man's spiritual and moral frailty. He noted that even angels had fallen into error, therefore it should surprise no one that man, including Job, has also fallen into error. This statement hit closer to the real truth than Eliphaz could know. It was one of these angels charged with error, Satan himself, who was the real cause of Job's calamity. Satan also led a large number of angelic beings into rebellion against God: <<His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, so that he might devour her child as soon as it was born>> (Revelation 12:4), and: <<The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world – he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him>> (Revelation 12:9). The Bible also says that in the age to come, redeemed man will in some way judge these fallen angels: <<Do you not know that we are to judge angels – to say nothing of ordinary matters?>> (1 Corinthians 6:3). Eliphaz was correct on this point: his angels he charges with error.