

The Book of Job

Session 12: Role of the Wife and Friends

By John Walton

This is Dr. John Walton and his teaching on the Book of Job. This is session 12, Role of the Wife and Friends.

Introduction [00:23-00:42]

Let's take a few minutes and look at the friends of Job and his wife, and let's talk about the roles they play. Of course, they show up at the end of chapter two here. And so, we're introduced to them in the plot. Let's take a look at how that's all working out.

Friends as Having Individual Roles [00:42-2:55]

Let's start with the friends. First of all, we can think of the friends as individuals. The book really wouldn't use three friends if each one didn't have a role. We have to think of them, then, as having individual profiles. Again, as you might recall, I'm treating this as a literary construct. So, the three friends, very intentionally, fill three roles. That's what the author wants to do with them. That's how their characters are used. And so as readers, we shouldn't just lump them all together and think of them as a corporate group. But rather try to see the role that each one plays.

Eliphaz, as he makes his explanations, his comments to Job is focused on the weight of personal experiences. We know people like this. They'll talk to us about their lives and their stories and what they've seen or experienced or concluded. Their conversation is based on those personal experiences that they've had.

Bildad is more inclined to talk about the wisdom of the ages. He's the philosopher among the group. Let's think about how people have always thought about these things. So, let me deliver it to you from an educated person. Here's the wisdom of the ages.

Zophar is most inclined to find understanding in a system of thinking. Let's systematize things. Everything's black and white if we just organize it correctly. And so,

we've got these three personalities, these three characters: experience, wisdom of the ages, and systemization. And so, they each have their own role to play.

The Friend's Role as a Group [2:55-4:30]

At the same time, of course, they are acting as a group, as well, there are certain things that they all have in common. So, the friends corporately represent the sages of the ancient world. These are supposed to be the wisest people around. If anybody's got an answer, if any explanation exists, these are the people; these are the specialists. You've got the world's best right here, ranked one, two, and three. I don't know which is which, but here they are. So, they are there to present the height of wisdom in the ancient world.

But in the book, as we've mentioned already, they are foils. The book's playing them. Because even though they have this reputation of being the wisest of the wise, in the end, they are fools. The book rejects the wisdom that they have to offer as being shallow, inadequate, and flawed reasoning built on flimsy assumptions. Here they come as representatives of wisdom, and instead, they're dismissed as misguided fools. It's an interesting strategy for the book to take the best the world has to offer and to turn it on its ear and reject it summarily.

Friends as the Challenger's Representatives [4:30-7:28]

The friends collectively play the role of the Challenger's philosophical representatives. Let me explain that. Remember, the Challenger has said, "Does Job serve God for nothing?" The friends represent retribution principle thinking; remember, that's where they build their fort. That means they're working on the principle of retribution and therefore working on the assumption that people get what they deserve.

Therefore, when Job suffers, they easily conclude that he must be suffering because he has done some great evil. They don't know what evil he has done. They make their random wild guesses throughout their speeches, but they don't know. They have no evidence. They have not seen any of it with their own eyes, but they assume it must be true. And so they draw the conclusion that Job has some serious issues to deal with and

that he needs to do so. Confess those sins, whatever they might be. Do whatever it takes to get your stuff back. The friends are all about stuff. Since the Challenger had said that if Job loses his stuff, he's going to give up his righteousness, we can see that the friends are working in that same line of argumentation. They are working hard to persuade him. It really is all about stuff. Your response should be to get your stuff back. If Job believes them, if Job responds along that line, that it really is about stuff, and I just need to get my stuff back. That would show that the Challenger was right, that Job's righteousness is really, in the end, all about the stuff. And so, we can conclude that the friends, unbeknownst to them, are inadvertently pressing the agenda for the very point the Challenger brought up. Is it about stuff, or is it about righteousness? The Challenger suspected it was about stuff. He seems to know human beings pretty well. The friends tried to help Job think of it in terms of stuff, but he wasn't so easy to persuade.

Misconceptions about the Friends [7:28-9:03]

Now, when we understand this role of the friends, we can hopefully discard a couple of other misconceptions about the role of the friends. The role of the friends is not so that readers can be instructed on how not to give counsel and comfort. Lots of times, people respond to the friends in the book of Job by saying what little comfort they offer and how unsatisfying they are in trying to commiserate with Job and bring comfort to him. They're pretty rough on him. But the reader is not supposed to therefore say, "Well, now I know how I shouldn't try to comfort somebody who's suffering." That's not what the friends are there for. By the way, don't do that, but the friends are not there for that. They're not role models, in that case, negative role models, but they're not role models of any sort. They're role players. They play a role in the book, an important literary, theological, philosophical, and rhetorical role. When we're trying to understand the book, we should be trying to understand the role they play because that's how they're being used in the book. And that's how the teaching will emerge from the book with them in their proper place.

The Role of Job's Wife [9:03-9:56]

So much for the friends; we'll detail their specific speeches later on. Let's turn our attention to the wife. Now, when she speaks up, Job has already suffered considerably. He's lost both stages. He's lost his prosperity. He's lost his health. It's interesting that the wife is not brought in as a conversation partner sitting next to him, weeping over their lost children. She's not really given a personality like that. Again, she's a role player. As with the friends, she also is standing on the side of the Challenger to try to push Job in a particular direction.

Wife as Quick Solution for the Challenger [9:56-10:26]

In one sense, we could say that with the wife's words, "curse God and die," she represents the quick and easy solution from the Challenger's point of view. I mean, if Job has already been pushed over the brink already, you know, has lost all sense of righteousness or faithfulness to God, she'll push him over the edge. "Curse God and die." And he'll say, "Yeah, forget it all, chuck it." So, that's the quick and easy.

Friends and Wife Pushing in Tandem [10:26-13:37]

The friends represent the same kind of thing for the wife. It's all about the stuff you lost. For the friends, try to get that stuff back. So, she's really working in tandem with the friends and in tandem with the Challenger, pushing that agenda. It's not going to just be left to Job's own mental workings to figure out whether his righteousness is more important than his stuff. He's being pushed, pushed by his wife, pushed by his friends. He's being given the suggestion, "Curse God and die." Make it about stuff, do what it takes to get your stuff back. So, that's the role she plays again, not that life partner who mourns alongside you. This is not supposed to be a critical shot at women by the author of the book. It has nothing to do with that. It's just the strategy of the moment of how he is going to respond. Job, of course, responds to her as a foolish woman. He states that "Shall we accept good from God and not trouble?" Again, a very positive response about God and about how we respond to God about not holding him accountable. And so, his wife serves as an instrument of the Challenger's expectations just as the friends do. Once

again, the Challenger would be proven correct if Job followed his wife's advice, just as the Challenger would be proven correct if Job followed his friend's advice.

The rhetorical role then of the wife, after all, is a one-off. She makes one statement. Then she's out of the picture. First of all, it avoids the quick win for the Challenger. It is not going to be easy. Second, it provides an opportunity for Job to again express his faithfulness. Not only can God take away what he has given. He can strike with pain and disease. Job remains faithful. Third, it serves as a prelude and transition to the friends because, of course, she comes on the scene before the friends do. Fourthly, it proposes a solution opposite the direction the friends will go. The friends want to tell Job how to live with renewed benefits. She tells him life is not worth living and tells him how to die. Fifth, both wife, and friends assume benefits are essential to the equation, pulling Job in the direction the Challenger has suggested that he will go.

Friends and Wife Unwitting Agents of the Challenger [13:37-14:37]

Therefore, all of them, the friends and Job's wife alike, serve as unwitting agents for the Challenger's expectations. So, the scene is set. The scenes in heaven have ended. The dialogues are about to begin. We are now back in the earthly realm where we will stay because even Yahweh when he speaks, comes to the earthly realm to speak. The Challenger will have no further role. It's only his surrogates the friends that stand in and make a case. So, he will have no further role. Now, we let the dialogue unfold as we move into Job's lament in chapter three and the first series of dialogues in the dialogue section.

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