

The Book of Job

Session 13: Dialogue Series 1, Job 3-14

By John Walton

This is Dr. John Walton and his teaching on the Book of Job. This is session 13, Dialogue Series 1, Job 3-14.

Job's Lament (Job 3) [00:27-6:10]

The dialogues begin in earnest in chapter four. Chapter three has Job's lament, which launches this whole section. In the structure of the book, Job's lament can be paralleled in part by his two responses to God's speeches toward the end of the book. Again, those are separated, and they're not near as long, but they sort of play a similar balancing role in the book. But here, Job's lament is opening up the dialogues.

Job begins the first part of the lament by cursing the day of his birth. Now, again, we get the word "curse" here, but this is a different word. This is not the word "*barak*," bless that's working euphemistically. The Hebrew word used is *qalal*, which involves incantation with a word of power. So, he's using an incantation against the day of his birth. He in 3.8 says to curse the day; that's a different word. So, three different words for "curse." *Barak* in euphemism, *qalal* an incantation with words of power, but then curse the day is *'arar*, and that refers to removing something from God's protection, the disruption of order. That's *'arar*. So, these three words, even though they're all translated "curse," have different nuances, and they work differently.

He also talks about rousing Leviathan. That would be something done by divinatory experts who would dabble in such things. Leviathan, again, represents the world of non-order, the world of chaos. Since Job is experiencing chaos, he invokes this idea of rousing Leviathan against the day of his birth.

In the second part of his lament, he expresses his wish that he had never been born. He wishes that he had gone straight from the womb to the nether world, or like a stillborn would have been, or a miscarriage would have been. So, he wishes that for himself rather than to have experienced what he has in the unfolding of the text. And

finally, in the last part of this lament, he turns to the misery of his present life, what he's now experiencing, and how difficult it is for him.

The lament is, of course, soul rending both for Job as he gives it and for us as we hear it. Readers can sometimes find a real connection to how Job feels about how horrible his life has become. From a rhetorical standpoint, it builds the transition between the prologue and the speeches through a shift in the genre, from narrative and the prologue to direct discourse in the speeches. It also gives turns to a theological emphasis as it considers what God's doing and what the world is like. In the lament, we see the development from a confident Job in his replies in the prologue section, now to a distraught, questioning Job.

So, Job is moving into his grief and expressing things differently. He's confident. Trust is eroding. He has no hope that death will lead to an eternity where all can be rectified. In Israel, in the biblical period, they had developed no hope for eternity, no reward and punishment. And Job being a non-Israelite, is even less inclined. So, he has no hope that somehow there'll be a solution to all of this after death. Death is what he wishes for, not for a solution but for an escape. Neither life nor death, at this point, offer him any hope, though, for him, death would be preferable to life.

We see that he has begun what is the natural inclination of all of us to ask why. Verses 11, 12, 16, 20, 23, why? why? why? It's the word that's on the lips of every suffering person. Why? And that's why the Book of Job offers us something of value. Not because it answers the question, but because it helps us to realize it's the wrong question.

At the same time, Job's lament betrays no hint that he actually believes he deserves what he has gotten. He's not come to that. He's not willing to say he did something to deserve all of this. And likewise, despite the fact that he's begun asking the why questions and that his trust is deteriorating, he's still maintaining his integrity.

Job's Integrity [6:10-8:00]

Now, this integrity that Job maintains needs to be understood. The integrity is not the same thing as all of those positive descriptors of him in chapters one and two. His integrity is defined specifically as his insistence that his righteousness stands on its own. That is that he is not simply pursuing benefits. His righteousness is for righteousness' sake, not for what he gets out of it. That's integrity. That's the only thing that he has to maintain. We're going to find that Job goes to some very dark places in how he thinks about God. His accusations against God are clear and wrong. So, it's not like Job's response is somehow blameless itself. God's going to accuse him of wrongdoing in how he has responded to God. It doesn't matter. What matters is the question on the table: is Job's righteousness, a disinterested righteousness, and Job's integrity is to maintain that position. That's all he has to do for the book to proceed along. For God's policies, that's the important point.

Introduction to the First Dialogue Cycle [8:00-8:20]

Now what are some of the issues that we face in cycle one of the dialogue? This carries us from chapters 4 to 14. It's the first cycle. So, Eliphaz speaks. Job responds. Bildad speaks. Job responds. Zophar speaks. Job responds in the first cycle, chapters 4 to 14.

Important Statements in the First Dialogue: 4:6 [8:20-10:15]

There are a couple of important statements in this cycle. They are important for the book, important for the message that's being given, and well-known, but ones that we have to look at carefully to make sure that we understand them.

The first one is in 4:6 in chapter four, verse six, Eliphaz is speaking, and he says, "Should not your piety, be your confidence and your blameless ways your hope?" He's raising a question about how it is that Job should respond. "Should your piety be your confidence and your blameless ways your hope?" I would render that just to get the understanding a little paraphrase expanded: "Is not your self-proclaimed piety the basis for this irrational confidence?" Eliphaz believes Job's piety is only self-proclaimed, and

that his confidence is irrational and not substantiated. He's asking the question: is your only hope really in the presumed blamelessness of your ways? You've got to give me more Job; that's not enough. So, it's not undermining; the book is not undermining Job's piety or his blamelessness. Eliphaz is undermining whether the way Job thinks about them will suffice. It's just an example of some of the complexities of trying to translate very difficult Hebrew in the Book of Job.

Important Statements in the First Dialogue: 4:17 [10:15-14:21]

Also, in Eliphaz's speech, we have this account of his mystical experience. It's in verses 12 through 21, and I won't read it, but you can take a look at it.

Now it occurs in a vision that he reports in this vision; he's claiming revelation. He sets up the whole scenario of this spiritual experience to highlight what he considers a great insight, revelation into deep truth. And he expresses that in verse 17 of chapter four. This is how it's translated in the NIV; just as a base, take a look at it. It says, "Can a mortal be more righteous than God? Can even a strong man be more pure in his Maker? Now think about that for a moment. "Can a mortal be more righteous than God?" What kind of great insight is that? Doesn't everybody know that? I mean, why the long setup of this mystical experience just to say something that everybody in the world knows? That a mortal can't be more righteous than God. It sounds like a silly thing to say. Now, maybe he is trying to convey the idea that Job seems to think that he's more righteous than God. It may be a possibility, but we ought to look at it just a little bit, make sure we're on the right track.

The first problem we face is to ask, "Can someone be more pure than his Maker," in the second part of the verse. It's not really possible to compare a human's purity to God's because this term translated as "purity," *tahar* in Hebrew, is never used to describe God. God cannot be described as pure or impure. It's a category that's not applicable to God. And so, it really can't be saying whether you can be more pure than God if God can't be characterized as pure. It refers to a clean condition achieved from an unclean state. Since God can never be in an unclean state, God can, therefore, not be

tahar, a condition achieved from an unclean state. God cannot be unclean. So, he cannot be designated as clean.

Rhetorically. If we follow the traditional rendering of the verse, Eliphaz appears to have overplayed his case. There'd be no need for a mystical revelation to make the point that no one is more righteous than God. And you can't say that someone is pure or less pure than God.

Here's my alternate reading. "Can a mortal be righteous in God's perspective?" Can you achieve righteousness in God's perspective? "Can a man be clean in the perspective of his Maker?" Eliphaz here is questioning the absolutes. Can any of us really get to the point where we are clean or righteous in God's perspective?

Now in pursuing that, Eliphaz is echoing something we know well from the ancient Near East -- everyone's prone to sin. And really, we can even find that, of course, in Christian teaching. But here, it's not the idea that you can't be more righteous than God.

Now, for me to demonstrate that reading that I offer takes detailed Hebrew work, and I've got it in my commentary that I've published if people can get ahold of that, they can see the full detail of the treatment.

Important Statements in the First Dialogue: 7:17 [14:21-18:44]

Another statement that we find that brings some question let's think a minute about chapter seven. We're into Job's speech. Now, Job's response to Eliphaz. And in chapter seven, verses 7 to 21 are among the most poignant that Job has to offer. He reminds us of some of Ecclesiastes as he talks about the transience of life.

So, we read, "Remember, O God, that my life is but a breath. My eyes will never see happiness again." He goes on to talk about that. And he says, "I won't remain silent." Therefore, in verse 11, "I'll speak out in the anguish of my spirit. I will complain in the bitterness of my soul. Am I the sea monster?" Am I the enemy? That's what he's asking. "That you have to put me under guard. When I think my bed will comfort me and

my couch will ease my complaint, even then, you frightened me with dreams so that I prefer strangling and death. I despise my life. Let me alone. My days have no meaning."

Then readers familiar with the Bible will get to verse 17 and see a very interesting, familiar line. "What is mankind that you make so much of them?" The attentive reader of Scripture will immediately recognize the line of Psalm 8, where it's such a positive thing. Look at what you've done. You've made us just a little lower than the angels. What are we that you've made so much of us? But Job turns that on its head. And he says, "Why do you pay so much attention to us? With all due respect, bug off; leave me alone, please."

So, he says, what is mankind that you make so much of them and give so much attention to? And he goes on to elaborate. "You examine them every morning, test them every moment. Will you please look away from me?" Again, very different from the Psalmist, who invites God's gaze, who invites God to see and examine. For Job, it's, "Please look away. I need a break. If I've sinned," and of course, Job doesn't suggest that he has, but even if that were the case, "what's it to you? Why have you made me your target? Why have I become a burden? Get over it."

So, we can see that this is true in Job's speeches. He increasingly turns his attention to God rather than really addressing the friends. Here he has accused God of being overly attentive and unrealistic in his expectations. Does that ring a bell? Remember chapter one, verses four and five. What are God's expectations? Is God overly attentive? That's why Job does all of this ritual for his sons and daughters. And so here, it's coming out.

Unlike a chaos creature, Job claims he's no threat to order. He doesn't warrant constant attention. He calls God, "a watcher of men." He uses a term that often bears a positive connotation indicating care and protection. But again, he turns it upside down. Job views himself as already on trial, already undergoing punishment. He requests a cease and desist order that God leaves him alone. He presumes that, somehow a trial has already happened and a guilty verdict has already been passed.

Important Statements in the First Dialogue: 7:20 [18:44-19:31]

In verse 20. Instead of saying, "If I have sinned," I don't think that's how we should read it. Job is not even letting that possibility stand. I would read it, "I have sinned." But he only means that in terms of I have somehow fallen out of favor, so that you have acted against me. Whatever I might have done to you, why won't you pardon whatever I have done that you have judged as indictable? Forgive me, whatever sin you have imputed to me, for which you are punishing me. Job's talking in that hypothetical realm turn concerns how God is treating him.

Important Statements in the First Dialogue: 13:15 [19:31-22:31]

One more verse. I want to look at; it in some detail; it's in chapter 13. It's a well-known verse from the Book of Job. And again, it's Job speaking. And the traditional translation is "Though he slays me, I will hope in him." When we look over how the translations and the commentaries have treated it, we see a wide array of diversity in translation. One of them reads, "Behold. He will slay me. I have no hope." Wow. That's a lot different from "Though He slays me, I will hope in him." This represents an alternate Hebrew reading. The Ketiv in which instead of the "in him," it's the negation. They both sound the same *lo* (to him) and *l'o* (no). And so, I will hope "in him" or "I have no hope." Again, it turns the whole thing around.

Another commentary reads. "If he were to slay me, I would have no hope." "If you were to slay me," remember the other two, "behold, he will slay me" or "though he slay me." So, you can see we're working with that Hebrew particle and exactly what it means. "If he were to slay me, I would have no hope," suggesting that he hasn't done that yet. So, there's still reason for hope.

Here we have we can see the whole question. Does he have hope, or doesn't he? There are three other commentators who agree on the reading. "Yes," not "if," "behold," or "though." "Yes, though he slays me. I will not wait in silence." Ah, this is a different understanding of the word that's translated as "hope." They sound very close, "hope" and

"wait" in Hebrew. And so, they're reading it differently. "I will not wait," meaning, "I will not wait in silence."

Okay. I would take a slightly different tact. I would agree with the back part of that one, but I would translate it, "Even though he may slay me. I will not wait in silence." I see it as Job expressing his intention to argue against God. Eliphaz had told him, you know, you don't want to go there. You go in and start arguing with God. Nothing good can come of it. You don't want to do that. Job is kind of arming himself with courage and saying, "even though he might slay me for it, I'm going to do it. I will not wait in silence. I'm going to make my claim." So that's how I would read it. Again, a very difficult verse, and various commentators and translators have had different ideas about what it says.

Summarizing the First Dialogue Cycle [22:31-23:00]

Let's summarize the arguments in cycle one. When we get to the rhetorical strategy of the book, what we want to ask is: what does each speech contribute to the conversation? Again, we're assuming that these aren't here just for kind of flowery, poetic expressions. They are trying to accomplish something as the book's case moves forward. So, let's summarize each one, and you'll be able to see how they work.

Eliphaz's Speech and Job's Response [23:00-24:40]

So, Eliphaz's speech in cycle one: I would summarize it this way. You have counseled many who are in similar circumstances as you are now. You should take your own advice. Trust in your piety. The retribution principle will hold. It's the wicked who perish yet from God's perspective, no mortal is righteous. Appeal to God, except his discipline. That's Eliphaz's first speech.

Job's response is summarized like this. The extent of my misery justifies my outcry. I wish he would put me to death. Then I would die with the consolation that at least I had assessed the situation realistically. I feel so helpless. I'm not sure I can continue, and my friends are of no help. I would be delighted if God would show me something that I had done wrong. My miserable days will soon come to an end. So, I may

as well speak my mind. Why, O God, have you targeted me for such attention? No one can bear such scrutiny. Can't you show some tolerance before it's too late? That's Job's first speech summed up in general.

Then Eliphaz's advice was to appeal to God and admit your offense. Job's reply: stop treating me as guilty rather than appeal to God with false humility and trumped-up offenses; I will confront him with demands for vindication. And thus, Job sets off on his path.

Bildad's Speech and Job's Response [24:40-26:23]

In cycle one, the second speech by Bildad can be summarized this way. How dare you suggest that God perverts justice. Remember, Bildad is the wisdom of the ages spokesperson. How dare you suggest that God perverts justice? Your children undoubtedly sinned. I mean, that's a given. If they all died that way, undoubtedly, they sinned. Face the facts, come clean, then it will go smoothly for you. Traditional wisdom gives you all the information you need—the retribution principle: the wicked perish, but God does not reject a righteous man. Come back, Job, get your stuff back.

Job's response to Bildad can be summarized as this. How could anyone ever establish his righteousness before God? You can't argue with him and expect to win. Challenging him would indeed be disastrous. He's too strong to overpower. And he's beyond calling to account. I have nothing left to live for. So, I may as well say it outright. He is not just. Both the blameless and the wicked are destroyed. I wish I had an advocate to speak on my behalf. Suppose someone could only speak on my behalf. Nothing makes sense. I can't win. I wish God would just let me die. That's a summary of Job's response.

So Bildad's advice was to take the traditional approach. The retribution principle seriously recognizes the inevitable conclusion. Job's reply: I know the traditions are true, but I'm not ready to admit the conclusions are inevitable. Yet I'm without recourse.

Zophar's Speech and Job's Response [26:23-28:00]

We get to Zophar. Zophar, remember he's black and white. What arrogance? Do you think you are so pure? Well, you haven't even begun to get what you really deserve.

Your understanding is minuscule compared to God. Give it up. Repent of your sin so that all may go well for you. Zophar sees things in very black-and-white terms.

Job's response to Zophar. "You, my friends, mock me. If only you would show your wisdom by being silent. You offer no comforting counsel and speak presumptuously and ignorantly on God's behalf. I suffer while the wicked escape scot-free. God is the fount of all wisdom and power. If only I could bring my case before him, I think I would have an airtight defense. I would request, however, that he cease and desist with the torment and the terrors until the matter is settled. Given such a moratorium, I could concentrate on my case. Show me the evidence of my wrongdoing. This life is all I have. So, I want to get this settled before it's too late.

So, Zophar's advice, in a nutshell, devote your heart to God, put away sin. Job's reply. You're badly misrepresenting both God and me. I hope I can get my hearing and restore my relationship with God before I die.

Conclusion of the First Dialogue Cycle [28:00-28:50]

So, in conclusion, this is our summary of cycle one. In this first series, each friend's speech ends with painting a rosy picture of the benefits of righteousness. The main focus of this series is that the friends appeal to Job to think about getting his benefits back and doing whatever is necessary to accomplish that. It's all about the stuff. The series comes to a conclusion when Job makes it clear that he has no hope for restoration and is not motivated by the desire that his friends have placed as the highest value. And that launches us into cycle two.

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