

Job

In Its Historical Context

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Introduction

Long ago, I was going through a “perfect storm” series of events that included well-meaning brothers who needed to grow in their compassion. I turned to the Bible for help, but I didn't know what to read. Suddenly, I decided to open my Bible at random and read whatever I came across. (I've never done that before or since.) I found myself on the first page of Job. Hearing Job struggle with his faith but ultimately stand firm helped me immensely during the one of the hardest times in my life. I also realized that spiritual brothers could mean well but still be harsh and misguided. However, I couldn't explain what *Job* was about or why it had encouraged me so much.

Job seems to ask the question, “How can God allow bad things to happen to good people?” The first two chapters seem to offer some answers. Satan caused Job to suffer tremendously, and Job stood firm. Then, for most of the next forty chapters, Job complained bitterly against God, as his would-be friends goaded him. Finally, God stepped in and rebuked Job for complaining but said nothing about Job's circumstances.

25 years later, after a lot of studying (not just about *Job*!) I think I can explain why the author wrote *Job* in such a compelling but confusing way. His reasons were not overly complicated, but they do have a great deal to do with the times during which he wrote. We need to understand the author, his audience, and their situation; that will require going into history and background. My goal in this study is to focus on what the author meant and how the audience heard it *then*.

I realize that is not why we read *Job*; we read it because speaks to our hearts, not to our minds. My goal is to provide an understanding what the author did, removing a good deal of confusion, which allows us to *experience* the story freely.

General Background

Brief History of Israel and Judah

Moses was born around 15257 B.C.E.¹ while the Israelites were slaves living in northern Egypt. The Egyptians had just driven the Hyksos—*foreign rulers*—out of the north, which explains why Pharaoh treated the Israelites so harshly; he viewed them as foreigners and a potential threat. The time had come for God to retrieve Israel from Egypt, but there was a problem. The Israelites had been exposed to many religious beliefs, each with its own set of gods. Furthermore, God intended to bring them into Canaan, where there were many more sets of gods. God wanted to bring the Israelites to a full understanding of spiritual realities; however, the first step was to clear out their misconceptions, with the many gods and idolatry.

To do this, God worked through Moses to instill in the Israelites a spiritual picture in which God was not only the ultimate power, he was the *only* power. There was a practical reason for this. The Canaanites believed in a sky god, named El, who was the ultimate god and creator. However, El had a wife and children, Asherah and Baal in particular; Baal was viewed as the son of El. Imagine Moses trying to teach the Israelites, “El is real, but Baal, Asherah, and the rest are fake.” So, Moses refers to God as “Elohim”, the plural of “El”, and God has no children, fellow gods, or evil counterparts. For example, note how *Genesis* 3 refers to the serpent as the tempter. We now understand that it was Satan, or the Devil, who talked Eve into disobedience, but Moses portrays him as a rather repelling animal and not as a spiritual

¹ B.C.E. stands for Before Common Era; formerly, B.C. was used. For simplicity, I'm going to assume all remaining dates are B.C.E., unless otherwise noted.

being. Essentially, Moses established a correct but highly simplified version of the spiritual reality.

Around 1400, Joshua led the Israelites into Canaan. Israel grew, and, around 1000, under King David and his son Solomon, Israel became a regional power. However, the Israelites never fully embraced God, and Solomon's idolatry and harsh treatment of the people led to civil war. Israel broke into two nations, Israel to the north and Judah to the south. Israel immediately turned to idolatry. Around 721, the Assyrians forcibly removed most of Israel from the land and scattered them among the nations to the north and east, leaving only Judah. Israel ceased to exist as a nation, although many of the Israelites held to their identity. At this point, with only Judah remaining, the Israelites became known as the Jews.

Judah was somewhat more faithful than Israel, and God saved them from the Assyrian invasion. However, idolatry also was overtaking the Jews. Around 605, the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, conquered Judah and began deporting young Jewish aristocrats to Babylon, where they were trained to become administrators; Daniel and his three friends were among them. Nebuchadnezzar allowed Judah to continue as a vassal kingdom, and he appointed a king from the royal family. However, the Jewish king and the aristocrats, in spite of repeated warnings by the prophet Jeremiah, refused to remain in submission and rebelled. Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem for over a year. When he finally broke through the city walls, he destroyed the Temple, the city, and the walls. By 586, the Babylonians had deported virtually all of the remaining Jews to Babylon. The few Jews left in Judah soon banded together and moved to Egypt. Judah lay in ruins, desolate.

This was a turning point for the Jews. The Temple, the place God had designated that the Israelites make all their sacrifices, was gone. Jerusalem, where the Temple had been located, was ruined and deserted. Their king was a captive. The Jews had been removed from the Promised Land and were living in Babylon. Worst of all, their prophets, including Jeremiah and Ezekiel, told them that this was God's doing, an ultimate punishment for their unfaithfulness. While the prophets held out hope that God would eventually restore them, the Jews were faced with the real possibility that they would lose their identity and their religion. They were faced with extinction.

Changes During the Exile

Faced with this threat, a core group of the Jews repented and fully committed themselves to God; however, they faced a basic challenge. The worship Moses had instituted revolved almost completely around the Temple and its rituals. That worship was now impossible, and it remained impossible for 70 years. The Jews had to invent a completely new concept of worship that kept the spirit of the Law of Moses but that did not involve the rituals and sacrifices commanded by the Law, which had to be offered by priests in the Temple.

The result was something similar to what we have today, with weekly community worship services and a greater focus on personal devotion. However, this involved a tremendous change for the Jews. A different form of worship required a different type of leader, and intellectuals took on a much more prominent role, even as they discussed and debated among themselves how to understand what had happened to their nation and how to move forward.

During this time, the Jews came in contact with the Magi, who practiced Zoroastrianism, the "official" religion of the Persian Empire. We hear about the Magi again in the New Testament in *Matthew* 3.1-2, where Magi (traditionally, "wise men"), followed the star to the birthplace of Jesus.

The Magi believed in one god, Ahura Mazda (roughly, *Illuminated Wisdom*), the creator, but they also believed in an evil counterpart to Ahura Mazda, Ahriman (or, Angra Mainyu, roughly *Destructive Spirit*.) The Magi also believed in an elaborate hierarchy of angels and other spiritual beings who were subordinate to Ahura Mazda. Finally, the Magi believed in an end time, when there will be a resurrection of the dead and final judgment, where evil will be destroyed and everything renewed. People have free will to choose between good and evil, and they will be held accountable at the final judgment.

However, this was the sort of thinking that Moses had sought to eradicate. The traditional view was God and God alone; Jewish conservatives would view the ideas of an evil counterpart to God, even if he was completely inferior, and angels as idolatry. Furthermore, the traditional view had no concept of an afterlife, although the Israelites had the idea of *Sheol*, *the Grave*, the shadowy realm of the dead.

Normally, the Jews would have avoided the Magi, but the turbulent circumstances, the political power of the Magi, and the fact that the Magi believed in one, supreme god apparently led the Jewish intellectuals to interact with them. While they certainly did not adopt the Magi's religious views, some of the liberals seem to have been influenced. During this time, we see these spiritual concepts emerging in the Old Testament writings for the first time. *Daniel* 10.13, a passage written around 535, describes a spiritual conflict and calls Michael one of the princes of the angels. *Daniel* 12.1-4 also mentions Michael and describes a future resurrection, judgment, and reward for the righteous in the life to come. *Zechariah* 3, written around 520, depicts a heavenly court with angels attending God and introduces Satan, *The Adversary*. Ezra also mentions Satan, around 440, in *1 Chronicles* 21.1 when he recasts the account of David numbering the fighting men from *2 Samuel* 24.1. Interestingly, Ezra places the blame for David's behavior on Satan, where *2 Samuel* says God incited David.

God, in part through inspired men such as Daniel, Zechariah, and Ezra, and perhaps in part through outside influences, expanded the understanding of the Jews. God used the exile to force the Jews to be more open-minded.

Conflict Between Conservatives and Liberals

Not all the Jews were affected in the same way by the exile. The chief priests and the other aristocrats tended to fare better than the average Jew during the exile, and they felt no need to alter their religious beliefs; furthermore, they did not want their social and economic privileges to be affected.

On the other hand, many other priests, and Levites, along with the average Jew, suffered greatly and their lives were totally disrupted. The devout among them felt a tremendous need to depend on God and to live in obedience to his ways. At the same time, while the entire nation was guilty of turning away from God, it was the chief priests and aristocrats who had defied Jeremiah and triggered the exile.

Two camps thus emerged, conservatives and liberals. These camps continued down to New Testament times, and we can see the bitter dynamics that formed during the exile and continued for over 500 years in the New Testament.

New Testament Times

Acts 23.1-10 describes the conservative Sadducees and the liberal Pharisees—yes, the Pharisees were the liberals of their day. The *Sanhedrin*, or *Council*, consisted of the Chief Priest and 70 others, split between other chief priests and wealthy “elders” who were Sadducees, and leading Pharisees. It was the highest authority among the Jews, yet even

among the leaders there was a bitter division. Paul started a brawl between the two sides simply by claiming that he was on trial because of the resurrection.

The Sadducees, the wealthy aristocrats of Jesus' time, were conservatives who held to the God-only viewpoint. Note that the "chief priests" who made up a large part of the Sadducees represented only a few of the priestly families. They denied the existence of angels, spirits, and the resurrection.

The Pharisees held to the liberal viewpoint, in particular, to the resurrection. They were intellectuals who enjoyed studying the Law, and, even more so, all the traditions they had formed in their efforts to make the Law practical and specific. They also saw themselves as the guardians of the average Jew.

However, even the Pharisees were divided by whether they were wealthy or poor—the majority of the Pharisees were poor. The wealthy Pharisees, influenced by Shammai, held to more conservative positions than the poor ones, influenced by Hillel. The positions of the wealthy tended to be harsh, while those of the poorer Pharisees tended to be tolerant. This is why the New Testament sometimes portrays the Pharisees as plotting against Jesus on one hand and conversing with him on the other.

The Conservative Viewpoint

We need to take a deeper look at the conservative, God-only view. The conservatives claimed there was only God and God's creation, with mankind being the pinnacle of the creation. Therefore:

- Everything that happens must be a direct result of God's will
- God deals with individuals according to their behavior and attitudes
 - God blesses the upright
 - God punishes the wicked

Practically speaking:

- Wealth, high status, and good health are blessings, the direct result and indication of righteousness
- Poverty, low status, and sickness are punishments, the direct result and indication of sin
- Catastrophes and sudden illnesses are punishments from God that come as a result of sin

In addition, the conservative viewpoint had no real concept of an afterlife, only the Grave, a dim, shadowy place where there is neither joy nor sorrow. The Grave was the great equalizer, a place to be neither feared nor desired. Therefore,

- Blessings and punishments come upon a person during their lifetimes, based on whether or not they find favor with God
- There is no hope nor fear beyond this life

The God-only view worked well for the wealthy and powerful. It declared their wealth and comfort as righteousness, it allowed them to look down without pity on the commoners, and it freed them from any fear of a future reckoning. (See *Luke 16.19-31* for Jesus' take on this viewpoint.)

The Liberal Viewpoint

The liberals did not disagree that God favors the upright and punishes the wicked. However, during the devastation that had recently taken place, many devout and wealthy families had been reduced to poverty. At the same time, the aristocrats in Jerusalem had been responsible for the catastrophe. Now, many of the leading intellectuals were poor, while some of the Jews who had prospered in Babylon had done so through corruption. The apocryphal *Susanna*, an addition to *Daniel*, portrays this idea; it casts Daniel as the hero who saves a righteous woman from two wicked elders, although it appears to have been written at a later time.

The idea that devout men could live in poverty, suffer oppression from the corrupt, and receive no visible reward for their devotion called God's justice into question. For the intellectuals, the new ideas of a spiritual world, a conflict between God and evil forces that transcends human affairs and leads to suffering, and, especially, a life to come where righteousness is rewarded, were very appealing. Therefore:

- God is sovereign, but there are evil forces, epitomized by Satan, as well
- Suffering can represent punishment from God, but it can also be the result of a greater conflict between the forces of God and Satan that transcends the individual
- God will bring about a resurrection and a day of judgment where all righteousness will be rewarded and all sin punished

Practically speaking:

- Life's circumstances are poor indicators of whether a person is righteous or not
- Blessings and punishments are stored up for the life to come
- The only real hope or fear is at the Judgment

This enhanced view worked well for the oppressed, especially the intellectuals. It allowed them to make sense of their lives, preserved God's righteousness, and gave them hope that devoting themselves to God would be rewarded.

Liberal Challenge

If the Sadducees and the Pharisees of the first century disagreed sharply over these doctrines, we can imagine the conflicts at the time they were first conceived. The conservatives would argue that the liberals were going beyond the Law and the Prophets; in fact, the liberals were. The liberals would argue that the old ways no longer worked and that God was leading his people to a new understanding; in fact, God was doing exactly that.

The conservatives had tradition, power, and status on their sides. Without the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile, the conservative position would never have been challenged.

The liberals had to establish their position. They would have argued that the current prophets, Daniel in particular, supported their views. Beyond that, they would have to persuade at many ordinary Jews to adopt their ideas. Dry intellectual debates would not be enough, but other tools were available. Satire, the use of exaggeration and irony to expose and to criticize someone else's ideas, and conundrums, difficult questions similar to a riddle but without a clear answer, would be more effective.

Et Cetera

The following are some additional pieces of background material.

The Job Legend

Most likely, there was a man named Job who lived centuries before, but we have no direct evidence of him. Like most great men, the legend surrounding him became larger than life. We know that a “Job legend” existed from *Ezekiel* 14.14, 20, where God is speaking to Ezekiel.

“¹⁴even if these three men—Noah, Daniel and Job—were in it, they could save only themselves by their righteousness, declares the Sovereign Lord.” (NIV)

“²⁰as surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, even if Noah, Daniel and Job were in it, they could save neither son nor daughter. They would save only themselves by their righteousness.” (NIV)

God saved Noah from the Flood because of Noah's righteousness. Daniel, most likely Danel, not the Jewish Daniel, was a legendary righteous man from ancient Ugarit. We don't know anything more about Job, but the fact that God mentioned him along with Noah and Daniel shows that he was well known among the Jews. Based on this story, we can guess that the legendary Job was a righteousness man, that he persevered in the face of undeserved suffering, and God restored him in the end.

Edom

The author portrays several of the characters as Edomites, including Job.

- Edom was the twin brother of Jacob/Israel, but, by the time of the exile, the Jews considered the Edomites among their most bitter enemies. *Obadiah*, written at the beginning of the exile, is devoted to describing how God would punish Edom.
- Edom was considered a center of wisdom.

The Jewish audience would be inclined to receive these characters with a mix of respect and disdain.

Wisdom Literature

Wisdom literature, which includes *Proverbs* and *Ecclesiastes*, was very popular in ancient times. The Jews, already acquainted with the genre, would have been exposed to a great variety of foreign wisdom literature during the exile; in particular, with various works with the theme, “Why do the righteous suffer?”

The audience would have been familiar with the structure of *Job*, and they would have expected it to have a certain basic theme.

Specific Background

Authorship

We have no information about the author of *Job*. Jewish tradition dates it to before the time of Moses, but that is based on when the legendary Job might have lived. However, the general history of the Jews and the appearance of Satan in other Old Testament books—*Zechariah* 3, around 518, *1 Chronicles* 21, written by Ezra around 440—point to a time shortly after the exile and the fall of the Babylonian Empire to the Medes-Persians in 539.

The author was a dedicated member of the liberal camp, and he was highly educated and eloquent. Perhaps he was a priest or a Levite who was forced into imperial service as a youth and then educated, as was Daniel. The author was keenly familiar with suffering through no

fault of his own and with unjust criticism, but his hope was in God and his Law. See *Psalms* 119, which expresses these themes.

Form

While *Job* appears to be edifying wisdom literature that discusses a common conundrum, that is a disguise. Lengthy, eloquent speeches are filled with proverbial wisdom, but the net result is folly and sin. Plot twists create surprise and confusion. *Job* actually was a biting satire that intended to ambush its audience, creating outrage and leaving them perplexed, angry, and questioning their conservative world view.

Ancient writings were typically read out loud; even more so, *Job* was designed to be read to an audience by a skilled orator. A dry reading fails to create the strong feelings of empathy, outrage, hope, disappointment, and confusion that the story needs to produce in order to achieve its goals.

In my comments, I treat *Job* as a play, performed on a stage in front of an audience. While I don't think this actually happened, I do think that, to our 21st century minds, it is much closer to how *Job* was originally presented than the idea of an individual sitting down with a scroll and reading to themselves.

As the work is a satire, the characters themselves are caricatures; that is, they are grossly exaggerated and completely fictional. They are not real people. This excuses us to examine their flaws without the restraint and mercy we should normally show.

Purpose

The author intended to expose the conservative viewpoint as foolish and to push those Jews who were undecided to consider the liberal perspective.

The author uses the legendary figure Job, who was famous for his righteousness in the face of suffering, as his central character. The audience would thus expect a conventional exposition on a timeless conundrum — How can God allow a blameless man to suffer? The audience expects that Job will suffer in some way, that his suffering will be discussed at length as he perseveres, and then God will intervene to rescue Job and to restore him. However, this is all a ruse; the author adds repeated twists to the story so that, in the end, *Job* ends up more as “folly literature,” and the audience is left in a state of confusion.

Job and the other characters in the story serve as avatars for the conservative position. They all display tremendous wisdom and eloquence, but the more they talk, the more foolish they sound. Worse, while they start as righteous and dignified, they end up quarreling; in the end, their many words lead them into sin. This is one of the author's primary purposes, to make the conservatives and their doctrines appear ridiculous.

The author also presents the liberal answer to the conundrum in the opening narratives, although none of the characters are aware of this. The author's answer revolves around Satan and his ability to inflict suffering. Satan causes the blameless to suffer *because* they are blameless. God is ultimately in control, but he allows Satan to afflict the blameless, within limits. The existence of Satan was a radical concept, and the conservatives thoroughly rejected it.

The audience was most likely skeptical about the idea; and they are left to either accept or reject what the narrative proposes. If they accept, they gain a sense of, “If you only knew!” even as the characters keep talking, and sinning, in their ignorance. If they reject, they are

sucked into the arguments that follow, hoping that, somehow, the characters will answer the challenge, but the author leaves them disappointed and frustrated.

A secondary theme is, “Who is truly blameless?” Job, as an avatar of the conservative way, exceeds the folly of the other characters as he repeatedly blasphemes God. At the same time, the extent of his suffering and his persistence in holding on to his integrity, even as he despairs of life and believes that God has wrongfully condemned him, is admirable. Meanwhile, the only suffering experienced by the other characters is that they first have to see Job in complete misery and then listen to him as he breaks down. Yet, instead of showing any compassion or mercy, they condemn him as a sinner and demand that he repent, adding to his suffering.

In the end, God rebukes Job at length for his “words without knowledge.” When Job finally repents, God turns on the others. “My anger burns against you and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.” (42.7, ESV) In the end, God justifies Job and not the others. The author thus transforms Job into an avatar of the liberal scholars. They may struggle because of their hardships, and the conservatives may despise them and accuse them of blasphemy, but God will justify them because of their perseverance and their humility in adapting their thinking.

Finally, the author provides one critical lesson. Throughout, Job attempts to use his conservative wisdom to understand what God is doing. Job ends with conclusions that are obviously wrong. God then rebukes Job, but God provides no answer to any of Job’s questions or accusations. Instead, God simply points out, at length, how Job is weak and ignorant. Finally, Job confesses,

Then Job answered the Lord and said:
“I know that you can do all things,
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.
‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’
Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.
‘Hear, and I will speak;
I will question you, and you make it known to me.’
I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees you;
therefore I despise myself,
and repent in dust and ashes.” (42.1–6, ESV)

The conservatives claimed that their wisdom allowed them to fully understand God’s ways and to know why God did things. The author claims that people are incapable of completely knowing God’s intentions, and that wisdom produces humility and unquestioning trust.

The Story

Structure

Job starts with several narrative sections that provide context for main section of the story. These sections take place on two levels, the earthly and the heavenly. The earthly characters are unaware of the heavenly level.

The main section consists of a series of poetic speeches by the characters, some of which are quite long and eloquent. The characters take turns trying to make sense of the events that occurred in the introductory narratives. Because they are relying on the conservative view,

this ends up as a complete failure. Job blasphemes, and the others unjustly condemn him. Finally, God himself confronts Job, but God's only agenda is to bring Job to his senses. The main section ends as Job humbles himself before God.

The story ends with a two short narrative sections. First, God condemns Job's "friends" while justifying Job. Finally, God restores Job, and Job enjoys a long life.

The ending is deliberately abrupt and unsatisfying, as the endless speeches produce no answers at all; even God's final speech says nothing about suffering. The only answers are provided, indirectly, in the introductory narratives.

Opening Narratives

The opening narratives consist of five brief scenes that switch back and forth between Job and those around him and Heaven, where Satan provokes God, and God responds by holding up Job as blameless.

1.1–1.5 Job

On the main stage stands a man wearing expensive but modest clothing. His seven sons stand dutifully in a line as he offered sacrifices for each of them on an altar located near a palatial house. Near the altar is a huge pile of ashes, the result of the man using the altar frequently. This is Job.

The narrator presents Job in glowing terms. He is blameless, upright, God-fearing, and one who turns from evil. He is enormously wealthy and the greatest man among his nation. He has seven sons, which guarantee that his family line will be carried on when he dies, and three daughters as well.

He is extremely concerned about his children, continually offering sacrifices in case any of them might have sinned in their hearts.

In every way, Job is the man the conservatives longed to be. He is upright, he offers burnt offerings, and because of this, God pours out riches on him and gives him sons to inherit his estate. The irony, however, was that the Jews could no longer make burnt offerings, which had to be offered at the Temple.

Because Job is so upright, there is absolutely no reason for God to cause him to suffer and every reason for God to sustain him in his exalted state.

Note that no one in the Bible is portrayed as this perfect, not even Noah. The author is setting Job on a tall, slender pedestal.

1.6–1.12 God and Satan, Part I

In a loft above the stage God sits on a throne, but dazzling, shifting lights prevent the audience from seeing God. Before the throne, angels dressed in white bow down. A figure, dressed in a black robe with a hood concealing its head, approaches the throne. It holds up its arm in front of its hooded face to block the light coming from the throne, but it refuses to bow down. This is Satan, the Adversary.

God asks where Satan has been, and Satan boasts that he has been going about through God's creation and viewing all the damage sin had done. God responds by holding up Job, who is blameless.

Satan claims that Job is blameless only because God has blessed him. In response, God allows Satan to strike Job's belongings.

The conservatives in the audience flatly rejected the scene. They were skeptical about the nature of angels, and they denied the concept of a being named Satan.

In response to Satan's mocking, God focused on one blameless individual. For him, Job compensated for any amount of wickedness. This reflects God's attitude about Noah before the Flood.

Satan's accusation against Job hits a nerve. Is a person righteous if they only honor God because God blesses them?

1.13–22 Satan Afflicts Job, Part I

On the main stage, Job is now going about the business of running his enormous estate.

Four messengers come to him, one immediately after another. Raiders have taken Job's oxen and donkeys and killed his servants. Fire has fallen from the sky and burned up the Job's sheep and servants. Other raiders have taken Job's camels and killed more servants. Finally, a great wind had struck the house where all of Job's children were gathered, killing them all. Within a few minutes, Job loses his possessions, his servants, and his children.

Job responds by preparing himself for mourning. He then falls to the ground, worships, and declares that God has given him everything, God has taken it away, and God be praised.

There is no mention of Satan in any of this; the servant blamed God for the fire that came down from the sky. Job believed that God had done all these things, and he simply accepted it.

However, the second scene claimed that Satan had done all this, with God's permission. For the conservatives, this presented a dilemma. They refused to accept the second scene, but this left them with the conclusion that God had ruined Job without cause. Someone might have argued that Job had some secret sin. However, Job was also a man of legendary righteousness, so such an argument had to be dismissed, especially as Job had responded heroically in the face of a massive blow.

2.1–6 God and Satan, Part II

In the loft above, God sits on the throne and Satan approaches him. God and Satan repeat their initial exchange. Then, God again holds up Job, this time noting that Job is holding on to his integrity in spite of what had happened to him. God accepts responsibility for allowing Satan to strike Job; Job has done nothing to deserve it.

This time, Satan is less smug in the face of Job's integrity, but he still insists that Job will give in, if only Job himself is struck. God again agrees to allow Satan to test Job, insisting only that Satan spare Job's life.

2.7–13 Satan Afflicts Job, Part II

On the main stage, Job is praying while his wife and a few servants mourn. Satan appears, but he is invisible to Job and the others. He goes to Job and touches him, and Job immediately cries out as boils break appear all over his body. Job then gets up, finds a piece of a broken clay pot, and scatters the ash pile near the altar. He sits down in the ashes and begins to scrape the sores off his skin.

Job's wife, seeing the new disaster, is overcome with despair. She cries out that Job's integrity has failed him and that he should give up, curse God, and die. Job rebukes her, saying that he should both good and evil from God.

Job has three friends, and when they hear what has happened, they come to him to comfort him. However, before they have come close, they are overwhelmed by what they

see. They tear their clothes and throw dust on themselves, acts of ritual grief. They then sit down with him and say nothing for seven days and nights.

This time, Satan was clearly the source of Job's affliction. Job again assumed that God caused it, and he again behaved heroically in the face of it. However, was not relying on God but on himself.

Job's wife responded faithlessly. Non-Jews viewed gods as unreliable; she assumed that God had turned on Job without reason and simply gave up.

Job's friends were speechless; in part they were overwhelmed by Job's suffering, and in part they feared that Job had somehow sinned and brought this calamity on himself.

Poetic Speeches, Part I—Job and His Three Friends

Finally, Job cracks. He stands up, his clothing torn and filthy, his hair filled with ashes, his skin blistered and raw from the boils and his scraping them. His friends stare at the ground, despondent and filthy themselves. Job begins a lengthy speech, and his friends quickly snap out of their trances. As Job sits back down, one of them stands up and makes a lengthy speech in response. As the friend sits down, Job stands up and made another speech. This cycle goes on, speech after speech, eight times, until Job's friends are... speechless. Job then has the last word, making the longest speech of all.

We must keep in mind that Job and his friends all held to the conservative viewpoint, which insisted that God blesses the upright and punishes the wicked. The way to escape punishment was to repent, seek God, and do right.

Job knew that he had done nothing wrong and that he did not deserve punishment. Furthermore, he had nothing of which to repent and, therefore, no path back to a good standing with God.

Job's friends simply assumed that Job had committed some great sin and that God was punishing him for it.

Of course, all four of them were wrong, at least if Satan were real and God had allowed Satan to afflict Job to prove that Job's righteousness was genuine. The right response would have been to pray, asking that Job be given strength to endure so that God would be glorified. The next seventeen speeches instead illustrated wrong responses based on wrong understanding.

3.1–26 Job I

Job curses the day he was born. He has forgotten all the days of plenty, and he can only remember his suffering.

Job ends by saying that his affliction came from God, and that he has been secretly dreading the day when God would turn on him.

4.1–5.27 Eliphaz I

Eliphaz starts with two questions. He first inquires if Job would become impatient if anyone spoke against what he has just said; he then asks how anyone could help but speak. Thus, he makes Job out to be a quarrelsome fool, while he is a reluctant wise man compelled to offer correction.

Eliphaz questions whether any righteous person has ever been cut off. He sees that those who sow sin reap the consequences, and that they perish at God's hand.

No person could be righteous before God; humankind are too small to be of significance before God.

Job's anger reveals his folly, and his folly has brought this affliction upon himself and his children.

Eliphaz claims that he would simply commit himself to God if he suffered, trusting in God's benevolence and justice, although he clearly sees no reason that he would ever suffer in the first place.

Job simply needs to submit to God's discipline, and God will restore him.

Eliphaz personified the dignified intellectual. He was smooth and clever, and he made his points using questions rather than statements. He had an air of quiet superiority and treated Job with condescension.

6.1–7.27 Job II

Job responds by increasing his complaint, claiming that he is justified. God has attacked him with poisoned arrows, so of course he speaks out. Furthermore, Eliphaz's words are weak and unappealing.

He hopes that God will finish him quickly, so that he can hold on to his one consolation, that he has not turned away from God's commands.

He then accuses his friends of failing him. He compares them to a stream in a deep ravine. During the winter, it freezes solid, and during the summer, it dries up. Either way, it provides no water to the thirsty. He reminds them that he has not asked them for financial assistance.

If they have something useful to say, then he will listen quietly; however, their accusations are empty. They will not find any great sin in him.

He has lost hope; therefore, he sees no reason for restraint.

Why is God interested in him, anyway? Why not leave him alone to die?

8.1–22 Bildad I

Bildad bluntly asserts that God does not pervert justice; therefore, Job's sons died because they sinned.

As for Job, if he will earnestly seek God and plead with him, if he is pure and upright, then God will "rouse himself" (NAS, ESV) to restore him. Eventually, however, God will restore Job, if Job deserves it. On the other hand, God will also surely overthrow the wicked.

Bildad personified the hardliner. He thought everyone should be tough, accepting God's judgments and waiting stoically for God to set things straight. He was black and white in his judgments and blunt in expressing them.

The Hebrew word for "rouse himself" has the idea of waking up or arising. Bildad seemed to view God's throne as a recliner, and God could not be bothered to get up and fix every little injustice.

9.1–10.22 Job III

Job agrees with part of Bildad's assessment; he cannot conceive that the death of his children is anything but a judgment from God. He made offerings continually for them because he feared that they would sin; he simply assumes the thing that he feared had finally come to pass.

However, while his children may have sinned greatly, he knows that he has not. Clearly, God has wrongly judged him, and he complains that God's might made God unaccountable. He is left at God's mercy, the one who has unjustly punished him. He thus claims that God destroys both the blameless and the wicked without distinction.

Why God is so concerned about him in the first place? It is as if God created him and cared for him only for the purpose of turning on him and destroying him in the end.

11.1–20 Zophar I

Zophar rebukes Job for claiming that he is guiltless and for speaking against God; God has overlooked some of Job's sin and is punishing him less than he deserves.

God is vastly greater than Job; furthermore, God has seen through Job's hypocrisy and discovered his sin.

Zophar then quotes an insulting proverb implying that Job is too stupid to understand his friends' admonishments. However, if Job will somehow change his heart, repent, and reach out to God, then his present misery will vanish in a moment and he will be secure and at peace. However, his most likely fate is that of the wicked.

Zophar mocks that Job shared the only hope of the wicked, which is to die.

Zophar personified the haughty. In his mind, he was above the sins and resulting judgments common to ordinary people. Before calamity struck, he had held Job in high regard; afterwards, he decided that God had exposed Job. He felt that Job had deceived him, and he was filled with angry contempt.

12.1–14.22 Job IV

Job responds with his own insult; he is not inferior to them. He then complains that he has become an object of scorn to his friends; furthermore, God is punishing him, who is blameless, while the wicked live at ease.

Job then demonstrates that he was just as wise as his friends. He notes, rather darkly, the ways that God brought great men low, and no one could oppose him.

He further criticizes his friends and warns them against showing partiality, arguing on God's behalf with unjust words.

Job then makes an anguished declaration. No matter how God treats him, Job will continue to hope; furthermore, he will continue to present his case before God. He pleads that God will take away his misery and then answer him, explaining the reasons for his unjust punishment.

Job then goes back and forth between despair at the finality of death, hope that God would somehow lift him up from the Grave and restore him, and despair.

15.1–15.35 Eliphaz II

Eliphaz rebukes Job for his words, claiming that they are the overflow of Job's guilt and that they condemn him.

Job, in his arrogance, treats the words of the wise with contempt. Eliphaz seems as offended by this as he is by Job's condemning God.

God is too great for any man to be righteous and pure in his sight. How much a corrupt and unjust man, like Job

Wise men know that the wicked will be overthrown; Eliphaz implies that was what has happened to Job is the result of arrogance and sin.

16.1–17.16 Job V

Job responds by asking what is wrong with his friends, that they feel compelled to answer as they do. If he were in their place, he would not act like them; instead, he would encourage them.

God is treating him with wrath and hatred, even though he has done right and not wrong.

The upright will see his plight and be appalled; they will rise up on his behalf. In contrast, his friends berate him with empty words.

The righteous keeps to the way and grows stronger; he is turning their “discussion” into a battle of wills, which he intends to win.

18.1–18.21 Bildad II

Bildad rebukes Job for his foolish talk and self-pity.

The fate of the wicked is destruction, even their descendants are wiped out. Job is receiving what his sin has brought upon him.

19.1–19.29 Job VI

Job claims that his friends torment him without shame. Even if he has sinned, they have no right to punish him.

However, they use his apparent fall against him, but it is God who has unjustly thrown him down and subjected him to disgrace. He calls out for help, but no one comes to his aid. God has set even his family against him.

Seized with sudden optimism, he claims he will see God, justice will be handed out in the end, and his opponents will be punished.

20.1–20.29 Zophar II

Zophar, deeply offended, holds forth on the downfall of the wicked; Job is experiencing God’s judgment, which he has brought upon himself.

21.1–21.34 Job VII

Job continues to contradict his friends. The wicked are not punished; in fact, the wicked die in peace, and they are then safe from God’s hand in the Grave. His friends are conspiring against him, to wrong him. All they have to do is to ask a traveler, and his words will be confirmed.

22.1–22.30 Eliphaz III

Eliphaz claims that God did not care if Job is righteous, God is too great to be impressed with one individual. Furthermore, God has not punished Job for being blameless but because of Job’s abundant evil and endless sins.

He then accuses Job on several specific counts having to do with social justice. For these sins, God has struck Job.

Job claims that God is too distant to see and demands that God leave him alone; these are the words of the wicked. God, in his benevolence, gives good things to the wicked, but he also consumes them in the end. In the same way, God has given good things to Job for a time, but now, God has swept them away because of wickedness.

Job must repent and purify himself, then God will restore him, and good things will again come to him.

Eliphaz knew that his charges were complete false and slanderous. However, he was incensed to the point where he would resort to false accusations in order to put Job in his place. What made him so angry, was it Job's blasphemy against God or the fact that Job rejected traditional wisdom?

The sins of which Eliphaz accused Job have to do with social injustice, and wealthy Jews might have contended that they were not sins at all. However, to the average Jew, these charges would have resonated strongly.

23.1–24.25 Job VIII

Job, ignoring Eliphaz's plea for repentance, expresses his longing that he might come before God and present his case. He is certain that God would then acquit him.

However, he realizes that he cannot find God. Even though he has treasured God commands, God is too powerful and capricious, so Job slips back into fear and despair.

He makes a lengthy complaint that God allows the wicked to continue while the poor suffer at their hands. In fact, God supports the powerful and the wicked.

However, in the end, everyone is cut off.

He challenges his friends to prove him wrong.

25.1–25.6 Bildad III

Bildad utters a final feeble protest. God is great, and no man can be righteous before him.

26.1–31.40 Job IX

Job senses that his friends have given in. He mocks their counsel one last time and then launches into a lengthy victory speech.

God is almighty, and none could understand him.

Even though God wronged him and made him bitter, he will hold on to his integrity until death.

He begins to lecture his friends with his wisdom. The fate of the wicked is destruction. Mining silver, gold, and jewels is difficult, but finding wisdom is harder and yet far more valuable.

He describes the glory of his past and contrasts it with his present condition, the humiliation of which he greatly exaggerates. He complains that he cries out to God, but God does not answer; instead, God persecutes him.

Finally, he again proclaims his righteousness and challenges God to show him his sin. Brazenly, he declares that he is done speaking.

Poetic Speeches, Part II—Elihu

32.1–32.5 Who Will Answer Job?

Job sits down on his ash pile, folds his arms, and stares at his friends with self-righteous defiance.

At this point, Zophar is due to stand up and answer Job. However, where Bildad had little left to say by round three, Zophar has nothing. Job's three friends sit silently, looking down in sullen defeat.

The audience watched angry and outraged. Surely Job deserved to be refuted, at least, for condemning God, but who could answer his charges that he had been punished wrongly? As

for his friends, they had wrongly condemned Job, even bearing false witness against him. They certainly deserved rebuke. These Edomites needed someone to set them straight!

Job had spoken nine times, while his friends had responded only eight. The stage was set for one final speech that would rebuke all four of them and answer Job's complaints.

On the edge of the stage, a figure has sat quietly from the time Job had started speaking. A man stands up, with Job on one side and the three friends on the other. This is Elihu.

He has a Hebrew name, meaning "He is my God." He also has a brief genealogy, and Ram, a common name, could refer to an important descendant of Judah. Is he a Jew?

He is much younger than Job and his friends.

He is angry. He is angry with Job, he is angry with the three friends, and he is angry that there are no answers.

32.6–37.24 Elihu I

Elihu starts by expressing how his impatience grew as he listened to Job's friends respond. However, where they had failed, he has plenty to say.

He challenges Job's contention he has not sinned, that God has wronged him, and that God has refused to give an account for his actions. He claims that God has answered Job by disciplining him in the first place.

God does not pervert justice, and he shows no favoritism, striking the wicked, great or not.

He rebukes Job for his insolent words. Who is Job, that God should even be concerned about him?

He praises God, who rescues the weak but punishes the wicked.

He begins to describe God forming a thunderstorm, waxing eloquent.

On the main stage, a small light flashes, followed by a faint crash of cymbals and the soft rolling of large drums. As Elihu continues to speak, the light flashes more brightly and the sounds become louder as the stage grows darker. Elihu speaks increasingly loudly to be heard.

Suddenly, a blinding flash from the center of the stage, a crash of cymbals and pounding drums. Elihu falls to the ground and crawls to the side of the stage.

Elihu personified the angry youth. He was zealous, over-confident, earnest, boastful, filled with praise, and long-winded. By the author's design, the audience was naturally drawn to him, especially after listening to Job's friends, who sounded dry and sanctimonious by comparison. The audience longed for Elihu to be the hero and to save the day.

However, after rebuking Job's friends for condemning Job unjustly, Elihu ended up repeating their arguments and their mistakes. From the start, he assumed that God had disciplined Job because Job had sinned, and that Job's complaints had no merit.

The author gives Elihu an ignoble distinction. He is the only character in the story that nobody acknowledges. Job reprimanded his wife, God spoke with Satan, but Elihu appears, delivers one of the two longest speeches, and then vanishes after God cuts him off. The implication is that God himself tired of Elihu.

The audience was now stunned and exhausted. Their zealous hero had failed. Job was still defiant. Who could answer him?

Poetic Speeches, Part III—God Confronts Job

38.1 God Speaks from the Storm

The throne appears in the center of the loft, and the lights coming from it are brighter than before. On the main stage, flashes of light followed by the crash of cymbals and rolling drums continue at regular intervals. Job and his three friends cower; Elihu is gone. Then, a loud, powerful voice speaks from the throne above.

For God to speak to a person was not unprecedented; God spoke to Moses from a burning bush. What was unique was that God appeared after Job had insolently demanded it. The three friends and Elihu had all said that God could not be bothered with one man.

Clouds and thunder were symbolic of wrath and judgment. During the time of David, God struck down a Levite named Uzzah for grabbing the Ark of the Covenant to keep it from falling over. What would God say in response to Job's blasphemes? What would he do?

38.2–40.2 God I

God starts by dismissing Job. Who is this ignorant man speaking foolishly? Job has demanded a meeting. Well then, Job should act like a man and answer.

On the main stage, Job stands and looks up into the storm, terrified.

God proceeds to ask Job a long series of questions that Job cannot possibly answer.

Finally, he calls Job a faultfinder who dares to argue with the Almighty. He demands that Job respond.

As God asked Job hard questions, the audience could not miss the fact that God knew all the answers because he had created the things he was asking about.

40.3–40.5 Job I

Job weakly responds that he is small compared to God and that he has no answers. Therefore, he will remain silent. Job then hangs his head and petulantly stares at the ground.

Job said nothing about withdrawing his complaint. His defiance was gone, but he was still unrepentant about the things he had said.

40.6–41.34 God II

God again demands that Job act like a man and answer. Job has condemned God to justify himself; God demands to know what strength Job has to do this.

Reluctantly, Job looks back up into the storm.

God then describes the hippopotamus and the crocodile, giving them the names of mythical monsters for dramatic effect. Both of these, God creations, are vastly more powerful than Job.

Again, God calls Job a faultfinder and demanded that he answer.

42.1–42.6 Job II

Job falls to his knees and bows with his head to the ground. Then, lifting his head, he answers.

He admits that he has tried to comprehend events that are beyond his understanding. He also acknowledges that God is too great for him to demand explanations. He then expresses the depth of his repentance.

The lights coming from the throne dim back to their normal brightness. The flashes of light and the cymbals and drums stop. A shaft of light illuminates Job, and a rainbow appears above him.

At this point, the audience was also humbled. They had watched as Job suffered; Job's suffering had led him to try to understand what was happening to him. Because he was limited to the—clearly inadequate—conservative wisdom, he had fallen into gross error.

However, God had graciously approached him and restored him. At the same time, they had watched the three friends and Elihu also apply the—clearly inadequate—conservative wisdom, and they had also fallen into gross error. The audience had likely fallen into the same error, especially if they had rejected the idea that “Satan” was behind Job's suffering.

Two lessons were clear. First, the conservative viewpoint, with its simplistic explanations, was lacking and led to gross error. Second, human understanding, no matter how advanced, could not explain God's purposes.

Closing Narratives

42.7–42.9 God Rebukes Job's Friends

Job's friends sit, looking relieved and satisfied. Then, God speaks to Eliphaz, who stands and looked up, aghast.

God expresses burning anger with the three friends. They have not spoken rightly about him, as Job has. Therefore, they must offer sacrifices in Job's presence, Job will for pray them, and then God will not punish them for their folly.

The friends do as they were told, and God's accepts Job's prayer on their behalf.

God's words here are deliberately paradoxical, as even Job acknowledged that he had ignorantly spoken out against God. Moreover, God called Job “my servant,” a term reserved mainly for Moses, David, and, in prophesy, Christ.

This shows two things.

First, the friends' error in accusing Job of sin and tormenting him was enormous. All three men knew Job and his way of life, and they had no evidence that Job had done anything wrong, much less that he had sinned repeatedly. They condemned him only because they had no other answer for why he was suffering. Unwittingly, they became Satan's helpers in testing Job's integrity, and they displayed great arrogance in judging someone more upright than they were.

Second, Job had earned his status as God's servant through a lifetime of righteousness, demonstrated by his repentance when God confronted him. God was willing to overlook Job's rash words that were spoken in a time of intense duress.

42.10–42.17 God Restores Job

After Job prays for his friends, God fully restores him and gives him even more than he had before. Job lives a long life and sees his posterity to the fourth generation.

Job's restoration was tied to his praying for his friends. This implies the importance of forgiving members of the faith community, even if they did wrong because of their ignorance.

Four Thoughts

There are many lessons that can be taken from *Job*, but I chose to limit myself to four lesser ones while leaving the big ones to others.

Should The Heaven Scenes Be Taken Literally?

Should we take the Heaven scenes, where God agrees to allow Satan to test Job, literally, or are they a literary device created by the author? This leads into a bigger, more important discussion of how we should interpret the Bible.

Conservative tradition says that we should take everything literally unless we are forced to do otherwise. This was a reaction to the use of allegory, which takes nothing literally and seeks to find hidden meaning in everything. The problem with allegory is if we agree that we can find all kinds of hidden meaning in every passage, then many interpretations becomes possible, and we end up with a tangled mess of conclusions. Literal interpretation tends to lead to a small set of conclusions that we can analyze objectively.

I support the goal of limiting interpretations to those that make objective sense, where we look at a passage and come to a small set of conclusions. When the passage is part of a historical narrative, then I generally agree that a literal interpretation will lead to the correct conclusions, because historical narratives are based on fact.

But, what happens when the passage is not historical narrative? Nails, screws, and bolts have roughly the same shape and function, but a hammer only works well with nails. Literal interpretation generally works well with historical narrative. We need other tools for other types of passages; identifying the correct tools starts with determining the author's approach.

Job's author intended to create a political satire using a legendary figure named Job as the main character. Whatever the sources that were available to the author, he clearly created a work of fiction, and he never intended for it to be taken otherwise. Claiming that it *could be* historical narrative is disingenuous. We must honor his intention and interpret his work accordingly.

The Heaven passages themselves are simplistic and lacking in detail, and they follow a strict pattern, right down to the words exchanged by God and Satan at the beginning of each interaction. The author did this deliberately, to *avoid* conveying the idea that he had any special insight into the heavenly realms. God's motivation for allow Satan to afflict Job was also simplistic and part of a literary device.

Jumping ahead to chapters 38-41, God showed Job that Job lacked both the understanding and the strength to understand God's reasons for doing things. This lesson certainly applies to our interpretation of the Heaven passages. All we need to know is that there is a conflict between God and Satan and that God grants Satan some authority to cause suffering, even to the righteous. Anything more is beyond our understanding, and trying to go beyond what God has revealed will lead us to error.

The Entitlement and Insecurity of Works

In *Job*, all the characters held to the simplistic view that God blesses the upright and punishes the wicked. A person with this viewpoint naturally tries to figure out what God wants and then does it consistently. This person's focus quickly turns to *doing* the right things and away from trusting God. Over time, an *expectation* grows that doing right should result in blessing and the absence of hardship. A peaceful and prosperous life becomes an *entitlement*. When hardship comes, that person experiences a crisis of faith.

A great deal of calamity exposed this in Job. He had consistently done the right thing and he had experienced the expected benefits; suddenly, those benefits disappeared. At first, he was philosophical, but after some time and provocation, he blamed God for wronging him and

even demanded that God appear to give an account. Job knew that he had done right, and he thought that God had not only failed to protect him but that God had deliberately abused him.

In all this, Job displayed self-centeredness. His thoughts were about how he had lived and how events had gone against him, and he judged God entirely on those terms. Job never considered that other considerations than his own behavior might affect events in his life, or that some force other than God might be at work, or that God might have some purpose in allowing him to suffer. Ironically, the story portrays that it was Job's great righteousness that *caused* God to choose Job as his champion.

The story ends with God restoring Job and doubling his wealth. But, what if God had taken Job up in a whirlwind—as he did with the great prophet Elijah—after he prayed for his friends? The answer lies in whether we truly believe in eternal life and whether we believe that God stores up treasure for us in Heaven. If we believe that, then the alternate ending would be better than the original.

A person believing that God blesses the righteous and punishes the wicked also experiences insecurity. How righteous is righteous enough? At what point does the amount of doing right balance out any sin? What happens when it doesn't?

In Bildad's callous first response to Job, he stated that Job's children sinned; therefore, they died. Shockingly, Job agreed. Looking back to the introductory narrative, we see that Job was constantly making offerings for his children, just in case they sinned in their hearts.

According to an ancient legend, Damocles was a courtier in the 4th century B.C.E. Greek city of Syracuse. He spent his days flattering the king. One day, the king, having listened to Damocles going on about the benefits of the king's wealth and power, decided to teach Damocles a lesson. The king offered to let Damocles take his place on the throne. Damocles thought this was wonderful, as he enjoyed the all the luxuries available to the king. Then, Damocles saw that the king had suspended a sword over his head, held only by a single hair from a horse's tail. The king explained that the sword represented the constant threats that a ruler faced from war or assassination. Having seen the sword, Damocles could no longer enjoy himself, and he soon asked to return to his lesser, but safer, place.

Job had lived under his own sword of Damocles. The fact that he was the most upright man on earth meant that his children were not as upright as he was, regardless of how they actually lived. While Job was completely confident in his own position with God, he lived in constant fear for his children, worrying that they might fall short of God's expectations.

When the news came that they had all been swept away in a moment, Job simply took it as a sign of God's judgment. In fact, their deaths had nothing to do with their lack of righteousness; if anything, it was a sign of Satan's cruelty. However, Job allowed his insecurities to diminish his enjoyment of his children while they lived and tarnished his memories of them after their deaths.

Our hope is in Jesus' righteousness, not our own, and we look forward to the eternal life to come, not to this life. We consider hardships to be opportunities for us to grow in our faith and for God to glorify himself in us.

Everybody Loves Elihu

Mature Christians generally can spot a fake quickly. They are too smooth, too persuasive, and these things stand out as red flags. Elihu, however, was not a fake; in fact, there was nothing false about him at all. For all his zeal, righteous indignation, and praise, his most winsome quality was his sincerity. Even his weaknesses, such as when he boasted about

himself, add to our sense that he wasn't concealing anything, that he was speaking straight from his heart. According to my very informal survey, Elihu is everyone's favorite character in *Job*.

The problem is, of course, that pretty much everything Elihu said about Job was wrong. He essentially repeated all the errors made by Job's friends. Elihu spoke more graciously, more eloquently, more forcefully, and with greater praise, but he was still wrong. Job didn't sin, and he didn't need to repent. Fortunately, God interrupted Elihu and sent him scurrying off the stage.

Of course, Elihu is a character in a story, and the author intended for the audience to like him and then to be disappointed by him.

The person most able to lead us astray is the person that is sincerely wrong. The effect is the strongest when that person mixes sincerity with conviction and a position of authority.

The solution is *not* to stop listening. We *need* to find people who are sincere and who share our faith in God and Jesus. We also need people to share their knowledge with us and to help us to grow in our understanding.

Acts 16-17 tells about the Apostle Paul's ministry in Macedonia around 50 C.E. In Philippi and Thessalonica, Paul faced a great deal of opposition and was forced to leave those cities. In Thessalonica, Jews who refused to accept the Gospel started a riot in order to accuse the new Christians. Next, Paul arrived in Berea.

Acts 17.10ff says, "Now the brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. When they arrived, they went out to the synagogue of the Jews. These were more well-mannered than those in Thessalonica. They received the message with all willingness; day by day they examined the Scriptures to see if perhaps these things were so. Then many of them believed, also some of the prominent Greek women and not a few of the men."

The following stand out.

1. They listened to Paul's message willingly
2. They examined the Scriptures for multiple days
3. They were skeptical but open to being persuaded—the Greek implies "possibly but probably not"
4. After much consideration, they believed

The two keys here are that they went to the Scriptures and studied for themselves, and that they had a healthy skepticism. Essentially, this means that they looked up Paul's statements and compared them with the Old Testament, keeping a wait and see attitude, neither accepting nor rejecting what Paul said until they had studied it thoroughly.

Our understanding should be growing, which implies that we are open to changing our minds at times. The key is to make the Bible our standard and carefully consider any teaching against what the Bible says, without being influenced by the teacher.

The Power of One

One theme among the remarks made by Eliphaz, Bildad, and Elihu is that one person cannot benefit God. The following are taken from the ESV.

Eliphaz

- 4.17 Can mortal man be in the right before God?
Can a man be pure before his Maker?

15.14-15 What is man, that he can be pure?

Or he who is born of a woman, that he can be righteous?

Behold, God puts no trust in his holy ones,
and the heavens are not pure in his sight;

22.2-3 Can a man be profitable to God?

Surely he who is wise is profitable to himself.

Is it any pleasure to the Almighty if you are in the right,
or is it gain to him if you make your ways blameless?

Bildad

25.4-6 How then can man be in the right before God?

How can he who is born of woman be pure?

Behold, even the moon is not bright,
and the stars are not pure in his eyes;

how much less man, who is a maggot,
and the son of man, who is a worm!

Elihu

35.5-8 Look at the heavens, and see;

and behold the clouds, which are higher than you.

If you have sinned, what do you accomplish against him?

And if your transgressions are multiplied, what do you do to him?

If you are righteous, what do you give to him?

Or what does he receive from your hand?

Your wickedness concerns a man like yourself,
and your righteousness a son of man.

In a sense, this sentiment is true in two ways. First, God is far too vast and powerful to be affected by one person; second, all have sinned and fall short of God's glory.

However, the author of *Job* completely rejects the idea that one person cannot matter to God. When Satan insolently confronted God, God's only reply was to point to Job. God called him blameless, upright, God fearing, and one who turns away from evil. After Satan tested Job to the limit, God personally intervened to bring Job to his senses, to rebuke his detractors, and to restore his family and possessions.

During the test, Job was not without sin. He complained, he lost faith, he condemned God's justice, he demanded that God meet with him, and he boasted about his own goodness. However, he never let go of his integrity, and he refused to curse God, the thing that Satan claimed he would do. In New Testament terms, Job held onto his faith, even as he was assailed with doubt.

This is a recurring theme in the Old Testament, where one person enjoys special favor with God and God works through them in a special way. God chose Noah to save humankind from extinction during the Flood, Abraham in order to build a nation prepared to receive the Christ, Moses to transform the Israelites from slaves into a nation, David to be king over the Israelites, Elijah to preserve a remnant in the midst of apostasy, and so on.

In *Job*, however, God used Job in the spiritual realms in a way that no person could see or comprehend. Even Job never knew why he was subjected to such an extreme test; he simply accepted that God had reasons that were too great for him to know.

God is interested in us individually. We can be tempted to think that we, our daily concerns, or our contributions, are too insignificant for God's attention. The problem here is not that God

is too big; instead, in our minds, God is not big enough. Here are a few quotes from Jesus on this matter.

Matthew 10.29-31

“Are not two sparrows sold for half an hour’s pay? And yet one of them does not fall to the ground without your Father’s knowledge. So, even the hairs on each of your heads are all numbered. Therefore, do not be afraid! You are worth more than many sparrows.”

Matthew 10.40-42

“The one who welcomes you welcomes me, and the one who welcomes me welcomes the One who sent me. The one who welcomes a prophet as a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward, the one who welcomes a godly person as a godly person will receive a godly person’s reward, and one who, as a disciple, gives one of these little ones a drink of cold water, amen I tell you, will certainly not lose their reward.”