

The Curse Causeless?



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Ps. 119:65–72; Job 2:11–13; Job 4:1–21; Rom. 3:19, 20; 1 Cor. 3:19; Heb. 12:5; Matt. 7:1.*

Memory Text: ““Can a mortal be more righteous than God? Can a man be more pure than his Maker?”” (*Job 4:17, NKJV*).

Last week we stressed the importance of putting ourselves in the position of Job, at least to whatever degree possible. In one sense, it shouldn't have been that hard, because we've all been there; that is, to some degree we've all found ourselves immersed in suffering that so often seems to make no sense and certainly doesn't seem fair.

While in the rest of the lesson we should try to keep that perspective, we also need to find the perspective of the other people in the story, the men who come to mourn and grieve with Job.

And that shouldn't be so hard either. Who among us hasn't seen the suffering of others? Who hasn't sought to console others in their pain and loss? Who doesn't know what it is like to try to find the right words to speak to those whose grief cuts at our own hearts, as well?

In fact, so much of the book of Job really is taken up with the dialogue between Job and these men, as they all try to make sense of what so often seems to make no sense: the endless parade of human suffering and tragedy in a world created by a loving, powerful, and caring God.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 5.

The Big Questions

Most of the action in the book of Job takes place in the first two chapters. Here the veil between heaven and earth is lifted, and we are given a glimpse into a whole aspect of reality that otherwise would remain hidden from us. However far our telescopes can peer into the cosmos, they haven't come anywhere near revealing to us what we have been shown in this book, written thousands of years ago in a desert that is most likely located in today's Saudi Arabia. Job also shows just how closely connected the supernatural realm, the realm of God and angels, is with the natural world, the earth and those of us upon it.

After the first two chapters, much of Job consists of what is called in the TV business "talking heads"; that is, just dialogue. In this case, the talking heads are Job and the men who come to discuss the heavy issues of life: theology, pain, philosophy, faith, life, and death.

And why not, considering all that has happened to Job? It's so easy to be caught up in the mundane things of life, the business of just living day by day, and to forget what the big and important questions are. There is nothing like a calamity, either our own or that of others, to shake us out of our spiritual lethargy and get us to start asking the important questions.

Read Psalm 119:65–72. What is the psalmist saying?

The psalmist was able to see the good that arose from the trials that afflicted him. At times, trials can certainly be blessings in disguise, in that they either lead us back to the Lord or bring us to Him in the first place. Who hasn't heard stories of those whose lives came to a crisis point, and only then did the person either come back to God or surrender to Him for the first time? Sometimes trials, however horrific and tragic, can be used for a good that, over time, we can see. Other times they appear arbitrary and meaningless.

How have you been able to look back at former trials and seen the good that has come out of them? How do you deal with those trials that have brought nothing good?

When Have the Innocent Perished?

Read Job 2:11–13. What does it tell us about how Job’s friends viewed his situation?

Having heard about what happened to Job, these men made “an appointment” (*Job 2:11, NKJV*); that is, they planned to come together and see their friend. The texts convey the idea that they were stunned at what they saw, and they began the process of mourning with him.

According to the text, they sat silently, never saying a word. After all, what do you say to someone in a position such as Job’s? However, once Job first spoke, uttering his complaints, these men had plenty to say.

Read Job 4:1–11. What is the gist of Eliphaz’s words to Job?

Perhaps a good opening for a book on grief counseling could feature Eliphaz here. The opening chapter could have been titled “What Not to Say to a Grieving Soul.” Though obviously these men sympathized with Job, that sympathy went only so far. It seems that for Eliphaz, theological purity was more important than basic consolation. It’s hard to imagine someone coming up to a person going through all that Job was going through and saying, basically, *Well, you must have deserved it, because God is just, and only the wicked suffer like this.*

Even if one thought that this was the situation in Job’s case, what good did it do to say it to him? Suppose a speeding driver got into a car accident and lost his entire family. Can you imagine someone going up to him, amid his grief, and saying to him right away, *God is punishing you for your speeding?* The problem with Eliphaz’s words isn’t just the questionable theology; the bigger issue is his insensitivity to Job and all that he is going through.

Think about a time people comforted you amid loss and pain. What did they say? How did they say it? What did you learn from that experience that could help you when you are in the position of having to comfort someone else?

A Man and His Maker

Eliphaz wouldn't exactly win any awards for tact and sympathy with his opening lines. Basically he was saying that it was easy for Job to be a light and comfort to others when things were going well. But now that evil had befallen him, he was "troubled." Yet, shouldn't he be? Eliphaz said that God is just, and so the evil that comes upon us is deserved.

Read Job 4:12–21. What other argument does Eliphaz present to Job?

There are many fascinating things one could look at here, including how these men understood the nature and character of the true God, even before the rise of the nation of Israel. This whole book shows us that, indeed, others besides the patriarchs and then eventually the Israelites knew something of the Lord. Here, in fact, we see Eliphaz seeking to defend the character of God.

What Eliphaz heard in "visions of the night" was in many ways very sound theology (see *Ps. 103:14; Isa. 64:7; Rom. 3:19, 20*). We as humans are clay, we are so temporary, and we can be crushed as easily as a moth. And, of course, what man or woman can be more righteous than God?

On the other hand, his words were trite and beside the point. The issue with Job wasn't whether Job was better than God. That was not Job's complaint. He mostly talked about just how miserable he was, how much he was suffering, not that he was somehow more righteous than God.

Eliphaz, however, seems to have read all this into what Job said. After all, if God is just, and evil comes only upon evil, then Job must have done something to deserve what he was going through. Therefore Job's complaints were unfair. Eager to defend God, Eliphaz starts to lecture Job. Even more than just whatever collective wisdom he believed he had about God, Eliphaz had something else as well: a supernatural revelation of some kind to buttress his position. The only problem, however, is that the position he took misses the point.

What can we learn from this account about how, even if we are right on a position, we might not be expressing it in the most helpful and redeeming way?

The Foolish Taking Root

In chapter 5, Eliphaz continues with his argument. It's mostly the same as what he said in the previous chapter: evil happens only to evil people. Imagine how this must have felt to Job, who knew that it couldn't be right and that he didn't deserve his present situation.

However, there is a problem here: not all that Eliphaz is saying here is wrong. On the contrary, many of these same thoughts are echoed in other parts of the Bible.

How do the following texts reflect the sentiments expressed in Job 5?

Ps. 37:10 _____

Prov. 26:2 _____

Luke 1:52 _____

1 Cor. 3:19 _____

Ps. 34:6 _____

Heb. 12:5 _____

Hos. 6:1 _____

Ps. 33:19 _____

Rush to Judgment

Much of what Eliphaz said to Job was correct. That is, he made many valid points, points that we found were expressed later in the Bible. And yet, something still was terribly wrong with his response to Job. The problem wasn't so much with what he said; the problem was more the context in which he said it. What he was saying, the truths he was uttering, just didn't apply to the specific situation. (See next week's lesson.)

Our world is a complicated place. It's easy to look at a situation and then toss out a few clichés or even a few Bible texts that you think apply. Maybe they do. But often they don't. Look at this statement from Ellen G. White about how we often bring upon ourselves the things that happen to us. "No truth does the Bible more clearly teach than that what we do is the result of what we are. To a great degree the experiences of life are the fruition of our own thoughts and deeds."—*Education*, p. 146.

This is a profound and important truth. But could you imagine some well-meaning saint going up to someone in a situation like Job's and reading to that person the preceding Ellen G. White statement? (In some cases, unfortunately, we can imagine that.) How much better would it have been for the well-meaning saint to have followed this counsel instead? "Many think that they are representing the justice of God while they wholly fail of representing His tenderness and His great love. Often the ones whom they meet with sternness and severity are under the stress of temptation. Satan is wrestling with these souls, and harsh, unsympathetic words discourage them and cause them to fall a prey to the tempter's power."—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 163.

The fact is, as is so often the case, there's much more going on here than Eliphaz and all the others, including Job, knew. So, Eliphaz's rush to judgment, even with all his correct theology, was hardly the right thing to do, given the circumstances.

Why should the following texts always be in the forefront of our minds when dealing with anyone, especially those whom we believe have sinned? *Matt. 7:1, 2; Rom. 2:1–3; 1 Cor. 4:5.*

Even if Eliphaz had been right, and Job brought this suffering upon himself, his words were imprudent and ill-timed. Job stands as a symbol for all humanity, for we all have been caught up in the great controversy, and we all suffer in it. And we all, at some point, need compassion and sympathy, not sermonizing. Sure, there's a time and place for getting lectured. But when a man is sitting on a pile of ashes, his life ruined, his children dead, and his body full of sores—that is not the time.

Further Thought: As we have seen, Eliphaz was not without sympathy for Job. It's just that his sympathy took second place to what he saw as his need to defend the character of God. After all, Job was suffering terribly, and God is just; therefore, Job must have done something to deserve what happened to him. That's what God's justice is all about, Eliphaz concluded. Therefore, Job was wrong in his complaining.

Of course, God is just. But that doesn't automatically mean that we will see His justice made manifest in every situation that happens in this fallen world. The fact is, we don't. Justice and judgment will come, but not necessarily now (*Rev. 20:12*). Part of what it means to live by faith is to trust God that the justice so lacking here will one day be revealed and made manifest.

What we see with Eliphaz also appears in the attitude of some of the scribes and Pharisees toward Jesus. These men were so caught up in their desire to be "faithful" and religious that their anger at the Lord's Sabbath healings (*see Matthew 12*) trumped what should have been their happiness that the sick had been healed and had had their suffering relieved. No matter how specific Christ's words were in the following text, the principle is one that we who love God and who are jealous for Him must always remember: "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithes of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone" (*Matt. 23:23*).

Discussion Questions:

- 1 How can we know the difference between the time someone needs compassion and sympathy and when a person needs lecturing and maybe even rebuke? Why would it generally be better to err on the side of compassion and sympathy when dealing with those who are suffering, even through their own sins and misdeeds?
- 2 Read again Eliphaz's words to Job in chapters 4 and 5. In what situation might those words have been more appropriate than they were here?
- 3 Suppose you had been a friend of Job and had gone to see him as he sat on the pile of ashes. What would you have said to him, and why? If that had been you in his place, what would you want people to say to you?

Beautiful in God's Time: Part 1

Mihaela was the only child in her close-knit Romanian family. Her parents were teachers, and the family enjoyed spending time together.

When Mihaela's mother began attending the Seventh-day Adventist Church, her father didn't object, but Mihaela did. She was 18 at the time and challenged her mother's new ideas. When her mother took off her jewelry, Mihaela told her that she looked naked. Nevertheless, Mihaela still loved her mother and wanted to please her.

When Mihaela entered the university, she often found her thoughts drifting toward God and religion. She thought about what her mother had told her about Adventist beliefs and even defended those beliefs in debates with other students. But she resisted a deeper interest in religion. She reasoned that she was young and had a lifetime to think about God and religion.

While studying at the university, Mihaela met a popular young man. It seemed that every girl on campus wanted to date him. He was handsome and charming, and his family was wealthy. But he chose to date Mihaela. When she was 21, the young couple married. Mihaela felt that God had showered her with approval by allowing her to marry such a desirable man.

The young couple often visited their families. While Mihaela's parents enjoyed a peaceful home filled with intellectual pursuits, her husband's family didn't enjoy close-knit family pleasures.

Mihaela's in-laws stopped supporting their son's studies when he married, so when Mihaela graduated, she took a job to help pay his tuition. She didn't have to work on Saturdays and usually spent the day doing housework. But she often found herself wrestling with her conscience over what her mother had taught her about proper Sabbath keeping.

As time passed and her husband still hadn't finished his studies, the young couple began having problems in their marriage. Often when a crisis came, she would pray that if God would help them resolve their problems, she would become an Adventist. But when the crisis passed, she forgot her promise.

When Mihaela's in-laws learned that her husband hadn't finished school when he said he had, they became angry with him and accused him of wasting his life and their money. Angry, he called Mihaela at work and told her that they were moving out of the apartment his parents had gotten them. "I'll quit school and provide for my family with my own hands!" he announced boldly.

Reluctantly, Mihaela returned home and packed up their things. They moved in with his sister, who lived in the same town. Mihaela continued working while her husband worked on obtaining visas to leave the country.

To be continued in next week's Inside Story.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Texts:** *Job 4:1–21, Matthew 7:1*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Understand the role of Job’s friends as they arrived to join him in his grieving.

Feel: Sense Job’s feeling of vulnerability and frustration as Eliphaz begins to talk about the cause of Job’s suffering.

Do: Refrain from easily judging others, while, at the same time, not neglecting the importance of biblical exhortation.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Grief Counseling

A How have others reacted to you in a situation in which you experienced suffering?

B What was the most helpful reaction of others toward your suffering? What do you wish they had done differently?

II. Feel: Eliphaz Speaks

A How wrong is Eliphaz really when he speaks about the cause and effect of sin? Why is he so wrong?

B What can we learn from Eliphaz (and Job’s reaction to Eliphaz) in terms of appropriate theological responses to suffering?

III. Do: Judging and Exhortation

A How, categorically, should we understand the command in Matthew 7:1 to not judge?

B Where would you place the fine line that exists between judging others and the biblical concept of exhortation?

► **Summary:** While the arrival of Job’s friends has elements of comfort for their friend’s suffering, once they begin to speak, they carefully but, nevertheless, mercilessly judge Job on the basis of what they understand as the correct theology. While not all is wrong in this theology, it is substantially flawed. Furthermore, easy answers and theological generalizations should never be responses to suffering.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Psalms 119:65–72*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: True and good judgment can come only from God’s instruction (Heb. *Torah*). The psalmist recognized this truth in the longest of the three Torah-Psalms (*Ps. 119:66*), found in the book of Psalms (*Ps. 1, 19, 119*). Sometimes true judgment is surprisingly unorthodox, according to this world’s wisdom (*1 Cor. 3:19*). Whether wisdom is unorthodox or conventional, we need to make sure in our application of it that we do not take over God’s role in judging (as Eliphaz did), lest we be judged.

Just for Teachers: Who has been at the scene of suffering and not tried to provide an easy answer in an attempt to make some sense out of what is nonsensical, even to provide some kind of hope, regardless of how distorted that hope might seem? “Maybe God allowed your son to die in the car accident because He knew that, later on in life, he would turn his back on God and the church.” While these attempts almost seem to ring with a tone of absurdity from the comfortable armchairs of normal life, nevertheless they suddenly rear their misshapen heads in moments of suffering, launched by well-meaning neighbors, friends, and even family members. Job’s friends are no exception, and perhaps we should not be too quick to judge them, because, after all, they came to comfort Job.

Opening Discussion: While working as missionaries in the beautiful country of Bolivia, in South America, a man and his family received tragic news. The man’s father had passed away in a domestic accident on the other side of the world. After the initial shock, the missionary walked up from his house to speak to the administrators of the institution where his family was working at that time. He needed to inform them of his loss and to figure out the logistics of traveling home to attend to his father’s funeral and estate.

Afterward, he didn’t remember much of what he told the administrators. But one thing he did remember clearly: a moment when four men—including himself—were sitting together on a bench in the gardens in front of the administration building, all crying and holding on to one another for support. The administrators were shedding their tears in sorrow over his loss. Through the shiny curtain of his own tears and pain, the man suddenly came to appreciate Job’s friends a tiny bit more. For they arrived from all sorts of different directions, they sat for seven days

with Job, and they wept and shared in his pain without saying a word (*Job 2:11–13*). What can we learn from Job’s friends at this point in the story?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: It is probably easy during this lesson study to be critical toward Eliphaz and condemn his wrong theology as heartless and far removed from God’s love. However, we might then find ourselves in the same position that Eliphaz took toward Job’s suffering: condemning Eliphaz according to a scheme of right and wrong theology, which does not always fit reality. As much as we should stay away from the ways in which Eliphaz and Job’s other friends condemned him, we should probably stay at least as far away as that from condemning his friends for their wrong theology and merciless approach to Job’s suffering.

The more important question here is how we as Seventh-day Adventists can lessen the suffering around us and find appropriate words for the ones who experience it.

Bible Commentary

How do we respond adequately to people who are undergoing suffering? How can we be compassionate like Job’s friends, who sat and mourned with Job for seven days, while, at the same time, not falling into the clichés of easy answers to the bewildering situations that life throws at us? How can we deal with our own suffering from a biblical perspective?

I. Grieving (*Review Job 2:11–13, Ecclesiastes 7:2, and Psalm 30:5 with the class.*)

Job’s friends come and sit with him for seven days, which possibly gives origin to the Jewish mourning ritual called “sitting *shiva* (seven)”—seven days of empathy and compassion. It is interesting to note that it is Job who breaks the silence at the end of the seven days in an attempt to process his grief.

There are some common denominators in how we as humans process grief. As Christians, we can help others (and sometimes ourselves) by being mindful of these steps:

1. The cause of our pain needs to be accepted as reality. There is an interesting tendency in the human mind to close our mental doors on the things we don’t like, hoping that, in this way, they will somehow disappear. If you’d like to process your pain and suffering, the first step is to accept it as reality.

2. The second step in the “grieving process” is the willingness to actually suffer pain and loss. Nobody likes to suffer. It’s human instinct to avoid pain. However, if we’d like to move toward inner healing, we have to be willing to walk through the valley of the shadow of death, as Psalm 23:4 puts it. Pain needs to be confronted and expressed.

3. If you want to process your pain, you need to reintegrate yourself into life. If your spouse or child has passed away, you might want to return to the familiar places you visited together. It is not healthy to live a life that tries to avoid everything that might remind you of your loved one. To walk along the same beach you’ve always walked together might be a painful experience but also the beginning of something new. Sometimes we spend so much time carefully framing our memories and filling our lives with them that there is no space for new life. Memories are good and important, but life goes on. Our life should not be a dusty museum of photographs of the deceased.

4. The last step is saying goodbye to your loved one. Be it the late spouse or the lost fetus, the lost job or the deceased pet—the pain of loss occurs on all levels. But we have to reach the point where we consciously say, “Goodbye.”

Consider This: How were you helped through the grieving process, according to these four steps?

II. Eliphaz Speaks *(Review Job 4 and 5 with the class.)*

The initial response to Job’s lament in chapter 3 comes from Eliphaz the Temanite. (Teman is located in Edom; in Genesis 36:11, Teman is a descendant of Eliphaz, who is from the line of Esau.) One almost wishes that Eliphaz the Temanite had remained silent, but, unfortunately, he speaks. His words (*Job 4, 5*) are marked by retribution theology, establishing a direct relationship between Job’s sin and God’s punishment. He introduces his words in a most positive light, commending Job for his role as a counselor to others in earlier times (*Job 4:1–4*). But then he changes his tone in verse 5 (“But now trouble comes to you” [NIV]), indicating that the innocent do not perish (*Job 4:7, 8*). He justifies this claim with his personal observations but also with some secret divine revelation that has come to him in a strangely described dream (*Job 4:12–16*), both highly subjective sources of knowledge.

In the next chapter, Eliphaz then drives the point home, concluding that Job must have acted like a fool (*Job 5:1–5*) and finalizing with an appeal for Job to turn to God (*Job 5:8*), repent, and seek divine favor once more (*Job 5:11–18*). The big problem is that, while there is a relationship between obedience and blessings (or disobedience and curses) that is biblical, in most cases, the situation is more complicated than our human observations can untangle. Our responsibility is to build up the broken reed and not tear it down (*Isa. 42:3*), something Eliphaz royally fails to do.

Consider This: Why is it so easy to fall into the same reasoning that Eliphaz used in his speech?

III. Judging and Admonition (Review Matthew 7:1, 2; Romans 3:19; and Hebrews 12:5 with the class.)

Many commentators have pointed out the apparent contradiction between the categorical statement of Matthew 7:1 (“Do not judge”; *compare also Rom. 2:1; 14:10, 13; James 4:11, 12; 1 Cor. 4:5*) and other statements in the Bible that seem to encourage judgment (*for example, 1 Cor. 2:15; 5:12, 13; 6:1–4*). Context plays an important role in resolving this tension: while the Bible clearly prohibits judgment that is based on human tradition or on a hypocritical attitude, it encourages judging according to God’s standards and His Word (*John 7:24*), but foremost in love.

Consider This: What place does biblical admonition have in the Christian life?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: It seems so natural for us to connect suffering with sin. Often we base our connection on subjective sources similar to the ones Eliphaz used to build his case.

Thought/Application Questions:

- ❶ When we talk to others about the character of God, what sources are we using for our argument? Are they based on anything other than the Bible?
- ❷ Should we ever connect suffering with sin? If yes, when, and under what circumstances?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: As Seventh-day Adventists, we are sometimes accused of being legalists in the way that we think of Job’s friends as legalists. The good news is—we are not!

Class/Individual Activities:

Create a list of dos and don’ts concerning the question of Sabbath observance. Then discuss this list with your class and raise the important question: Is this list of permissions and prohibitions the best way to go about Sabbath observance? Why, or why not?