

Job Chapter 15

In our class on Sunday, we studied Job chapter 14, the third and final chapter of Job's response to Zophar. We spent some time trying to understand the concept of Sheol through the eyes of an ancient Hebrew. From what I can gather from the book of Job, other biblical examples, and modern Jewish theology (which would potentially be aligned with pre-messianic views on death and the afterlife), Sheol would have been viewed in a broad, generic sense as the dwelling place of souls after the death of the body. For the righteous, it may have been viewed as a place of rest, and for the unrighteous, an unpleasant place. However, even for the righteous it seemed to not be a place one looked forward to with eagerness in this life, but rather to be accepted as the fate of all men. I do not know whether these descriptions are accurate, but I believe at a minimum they do not contradict what little we can read of Sheol – or Hades – in the bible.

The point of Job's speech in chapter 14 is how short his life on earth is, and how regrettable it is that it has produced such suffering. Job's suffering had reached the point to which he had in previous chapters wished for death so that he might find relief. In chapter 14, Job speaks wishfully for Sheol to be his home until such a time as God's anger would subside, when Job would be restored to life and have a "do over" of sorts. But in verse 18, Job recognizes that this is merely wishful thinking and reaffirms his belief in the finality of Sheol.

Now in chapter 15, we read Eliphaz's first response to Job's statements. In verses 1-3, "wind" connotes emptiness. It calls to mind the book of Ecclesiastes, in which one recurring phrase "striving after the wind" is used to mean the emptiness of the tasks we perform on earth. Here, Eliphaz means "wind" in a similar sense: Job's wisdom and words are empty. The east wind, as we can read in Jonah chapter 4, is to be understood as a scorching, unpleasant wind. A constant east wind would mean death for crops, driving moisture away from the earth. Eliphaz says Job has "filled his belly with the east wind." That could mean Job's words were unpleasant and counterproductive. This view fits well with verse 3. The association with the belly could also be Eliphaz's commentary of how Job's emotions were out of control, and his inner-being in turmoil.

In verse 4-6, Eliphaz accuses Job of not showing the proper fear and reverence that he should show towards God, and that this attitude was getting in the way of Job being able to make peace with God (which we presume would be the outcome of "meditation" or "prayer" in verse 4). Verses 5-6 are another example of Job's friends being unable to accuse Job of any sin prior to this event, but assuming that his words are now evidence of some previous sin. To try to rephrase Eliphaz: "only a man guilty of some sin or another talks like that."

In the previous three chapters, we considered several instances in which Job attempted to convince his friends that he understood their points and that they were not keeping up with him. Job believed he had progressed further in his understanding of this situation than they had, but they did not realize this. I believe Eliphaz addresses this comment in verses 7-10, defending his own wisdom and that of Bildad and Zophar.

In verse 11, we see Eliphaz's arguments from his own perspective: he believed he had been giving Job good news, bringing hope that Job would be restored if only Job would repent. That Eliphaz would ask Job if "the comforts of God are too small for you" is an indictment against what he perceives to be Job's pride. Eliphaz believes Job thinks he is too smart and too righteous to accept God's offer of grace on the

terms of repentance, and thereby is refusing God's offer of comfort. Verses 12-13 make it clear that Eliphaz believes Job has turned his face against God.

Eliphaz then restates what the shadowy figure told him, about which we first read in chapter 4. Job 15:14-16 are almost the same as Job 4:17-20, affirming that Eliphaz believed what this figure revealed to him. However, now in chapter 15, Eliphaz makes it much more personal than he had in chapter 4, concluding the thought in verse 16 with: "how much less one who is abominable and corrupt, a man who drinks injustice like water!" The idea behind Job "drinking injustice like water" is that of a vile individual whose pursuit of personal gain at the expense of others has become intertwined with his nature.

Verse 18 can apparently be understood one of two ways. It could mean the wisdom of wise men was not hidden from their fathers, or it could mean the wisdom that men learned from their fathers was not hidden from anyone else. Either interpretation more or less leads to the same conclusion. In the context of Eliphaz's rebuke of Job, it indicates that what Job is speaking about God – if it were in fact true – would have been hidden from all of those wise men who had passed on before them. For Eliphaz, this is a non-starter. Should Eliphaz believe the compendium of wisdom of their heritage, or should he believe this man Job who is now seemingly contradicting all of what had been concluded about God before? To Eliphaz, that would be a rhetorical question – of course he is not going to believe Job. Ironically, God is doing with Job something which, as far as anyone knows, had never been done before.

The layers of personal application are thick: we should defend the truth as we have come to understand it, but let us still give ourselves room to learn from others. I don't envy any of these men as they struggle to find answers as to why this is happening. On the other hand, the fact that we are now beginning to see them go rounds could be evidence that the wrong questions are being asked. When there is a disagreement, I have seen how unfounded assumptions and faulty questions on both sides produce an impasse that prevents productive discussion. In the case of Job and his friends, the faulty assumptions are apparent based on our broader understanding of God's role. As it pertains to faulty questions, what are the chances that agreement over this matter would be settled on the basis of the quality of Job's righteousness? I suspect the chances are not good.

I understand verses 20-35 as Eliphaz recounting to Job those things that had been searched out by many wise men who had come before. To summarize briefly: the wicked man gets what he deserves. In our zeal to defend God, can we sometimes lack compassion? It is true that God will punish the wicked and reward the righteous. He has promised this. But surely we recognize that just because a person is suffering does not mean they deserve it in some way. In Eliphaz's world, the wicked may prosper, but only for a time. God will eventually bring them to ruin. But if we only associate ruin with justice – even if only for the sake of argument – where is there room for mercy?

We will plan to study chapter 16 on Sunday, in which we will see Job take some of the things Eliphaz spoke about very personally.