

Job Chapters 17 and 18

On Sunday, we examined Job's response to Eliphaz's second rebuke in chapter 15. Recall back in Job 2:11: "Now when Job's three friends heard of all this evil that had come upon him, they came each from his own place, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. They made an appointment together to come to show him sympathy and comfort him."

Job did not forget the original purpose for their assembly.

In chapter 16, verses 1-5, Job rebukes his friends for being "miserable comforters." As we have seen Job do in previous chapters, he attempts to place himself in their position, and asks them to do the same. For then, they might comfort and strengthen him rather than set themselves to the task of discerning his faults.

In chapter 16, verses 7-17, we cross-referenced some of Job's defenses to Eliphaz's accusations in chapter 15. Some examples included:

- Job 15:34-35 vs. Job 16:7, pertaining to how God treats a man who keeps evil companions
- Job 15:27-28 vs. Job 16:8, pertaining to Job's leanness as a testimony to him not taking advantage of others
- Job 15:11 vs. chapter 16:9-14, pertaining to the comforts of God and to whom they are made available

We also read Job 16:18 through 17:5, in which Job expresses his desire for these events to be remembered so that he might be vindicated by God from the false accusations of his friends. Now in verse 6, Job seems to turn his attention back to his friends.

As we have already seen how several passages in chapters 16 and 17 could be interpreted in different ways, the same can be said of verses 6-10. If Job is being sincere when he speaks of the *upright*, *innocent*, *righteous*, and those with *clean hands* in this section, the meaning is hard for me to determine. The descriptions don't seem to fit Job very well, as he appears to not be embodying the results of these people, such as stirring himself up against the godless, nor is he growing stronger and stronger. The descriptions also don't seem to fit his friends. Job may be referring to some hypothetical people for the purpose of contrasting them with his friends. In other words, if his friends were right and pure, then their words would be difficult for him to contend with while maintaining his own integrity. However, in verse 10, Job issues a challenge to show that they are no match for him at all. In fact, according to Job there is not a "wise man among you."

Another thought is perhaps Job is being sarcastic in this passage. The "upright" throughout verses 8-9 could be referring to those who see themselves to be upright, and who perceive others, such as Job, as "godless." In other words, Job would be saying: "I again see myself through your eyes. You think you are righteous and I am godless. You speak lies but prosper, and I hold to the truth and have been brought to the point of death. But I maintain that you have nothing of substance by which to accuse me."

Verse 11 again offers up a melancholy picture of Sheol and death. Job seems to state that this life is where his plans would have been fulfilled, and where the desires of his heart would have been carried out.

Verse 12 is difficult for me to understand. It reads “They make night into day: ‘The light,’ they say, ‘is near to the darkness.’” Perhaps Job is quoting some then-contemporary proverb and is either applying it to his situation or subverting it to make his own point. Perhaps the proverb is similar to a more modern saying: “the night is darkest just before dawn.” In other words, perhaps it was intended to instill hope during difficult times. If this is the case, then it seems like Job is subverting it to express his hopelessness. This interpretation would fit with verses 13-16. In verses 13-16, I believe Job is saying something to the effect of: “If light is near to darkness, and if I should hope for the light, shall my hope and I descend to Sheol together? Shall we be eaten by worms together? Will any of you see my hope fulfilled after I die? Shall I?” In other words, his time was almost spent. The time for hope, in Job’s view, had probably already passed. His point would be: “Stop preaching hope on the basis of repentance. Here I sit in sackcloth and ashes, behaving like a man who is petitioning God for forgiveness, even though I am innocent. I’m doing my part to reconcile with God, even though I don’t see a reason for why I must. If you want to help, speak words of comfort to me.”

I personally think Job’s response to Eliphaz is brilliant. Job is a deep thinker and is very clever with his words. It would be intimidating to be on the opposite side of some debate with Job, especially when in his anguish, he has justified loosening the bridle of his tongue. Yet one wonders in our lives: how much cleverness at our expense would have been directed against us, but was concealed in preference to showing patience and love? Have you ever had the privilege of believing you had won some argument, only to realize the other person was holding back because they didn’t want to break you down? I suspect that has happened to me more times than I realize.

In chapter 18, Bildad shows that he is brave enough now to speak up a second time.

In verses 1-2, it is apparent that Bildad is not ready to relent and return to his original purpose for having assembled. He says Job is the one who needs to listen and stop speaking. In verses 3-4, Bildad seems to express indignation at the insults Job has cast his direction. Verse 4 causes me to picture a toddler (or maybe an adult acting like a toddler) raging against some reality that he does not want to accept. What will his raging accomplish? Can his thrashing and screaming change anything for the better? Such is Job in Bildad’s view. “You who tear yourself in your anger, shall the earth be forsaken for you, or the rock be removed out of its place?”

In verses 5-6, Bildad seems to be building on his observation that Job called him “stupid as cattle” (verse 3). According to Bildad, it is not his light that is put out. Job said that God had closed their hearts to understanding (Job 17:4), but Bildad says Job – represented by this “wicked” person – is the one stumbling around in darkness. In verses 7-12, the wicked man does not even know where he is going and stumbles into trap after trap. It is his “own feet” (verse 8) that lead him there, not (by implication) someone else like God bringing it upon him without cause. The wicked man’s steps were strong (verse 7), indicating a person who is led by his own pride. Notice how many times Bildad makes reference to feet in verses 7-12. The man in Bildad’s argument is not being dragged against his will – his own feet have brought him to the calamity he now faces.

In verse 13, the term “firstborn of death” as I understand it is comparable to a more contemporary expression: “the mother of all deaths.” Verses 14-15 compare this wicked man to the terror he now faces: the man is like a sojourner trusting in a misguided sense of permanence in his tent, and his tormenter is like a king.

Verses 15-19 refers to how “his memory perishes from the earth” both in poetic imagery and in plain speech. I believe these words would hurt Job deeply given the fact that he had lost his children, and their loss is now being used as evidence against his character.

Bildad ends his scathing indictment of Job in verses 20-21 by pointing out how much of a public spectacle God makes those who rebel against him. This is perhaps being offered as a reason for why, as Job stated in chapter 17:6 “he has made me a byword of the peoples, and I am one before whom men spit.”

If I were to witness this exchange, I must admit that I would be rooting for Job. Job’s friends are dead set on finding some fault that explains his suffering in a way that confirms their beliefs about God. As we go, it seems to become more and more apparent that Job’s friends have very little substance to their arguments or accusations.

One of the challenges of reading Job is being given a front seat view to how a human mind – and a righteous one at that – processes suffering and grieves over it. What lessons do you take from it, and what obvious principles are you finding that deserve more meditation and application? Perhaps the reality of death? The fragility of life? The state of broken relationships? I’ve been thinking about these things more as a result of these last several chapters. For a philosophical book, the parts that stick with me most are easy to understand but uncomfortable to “sit in,” as Shawn would say.