

Job Chapters 23 and 24

In chapter 22, we read Eliphaz's third and final argument against Job. We noted how Eliphaz progressed in his three arguments from showing tact and restraint to baselessly accusing Job of crimes he was not guilty of. Eliphaz begins by trying to convince Job that Job was taking the wrong approach – even if Job could prove his innocence, what would that be to God? Eliphaz is touching on what remains today as a major theological point of contention among those who are trying to follow Christ: how valuable is a man's righteousness to God? According to Eliphaz, there is no good that man brings to the table, and God gains no profit from man's righteousness.

As we consider whether Eliphaz has a valid point, we recall that it came from the shadowy figure who seemed to visit Eliphaz while he was asleep or experiencing an episode of sleep paralysis. Also, God does not endorse Eliphaz's arguments at the end of the book. Aside from these evidences, Eliphaz's argument is problematic because it defeats itself in what it is trying to accomplish in Job. If God is not impressed with a man who "makes his ways blameless" as Eliphaz states, then what is the value of the repentance that Eliphaz is trying to lead Job to? Minimally, an argument must be intrinsically consistent.

As we have pointed out several times already, Eliphaz is using deductive reasoning when trying to deal with the problem he is now faced with concerning his friend, Job. Eliphaz reasons that God is reproving Job and has entered into judgment with him. It would not make sense for God to do this for the reason of Job fearing him. Therefore, Job does not fear God. This is sound deductive reasoning, but the audience knows the premise is flawed: God is not entering into judgment with Job. God has other reasons for allowing this to happen that were not revealed yet to Job and his friends.

After accusing Job falsely, Eliphaz re-states what he and his friends have continued to argue: the wicked man does not prosper. Job has refuted this point several times, most recently in chapter 21. He will address it again in his response in chapter 23.

In verses 1-2, Job says: "Today also my complaint is bitter; my hand is heavy on account of my groaning." I think Job is saying that his complaint brings him no relief, meaning he is not speaking as his wife advised him, to simply "curse God and die" and go out in a blaze of glory. Job maintains that the reason he speaks these things is because he believes them to be true, not because they bring him any comfort. When Job states "my hand is heavy on account of my groaning," the hand is often associated with one's power or influence over a situation. By referring to his hand as "heavy," it seems Job is saying that he has no strength or might to affect his outcome.

In verses 3-7, Job expresses his desire for how the scenario would play out in which he could petition his case before God. Job believed he had an iron-clad defense, such that his words could not be refuted even by God, which would result in his acquittal. In verses 8-9, Job laments the fact that as much as he would like to speak with God about these events, God is nowhere to be found.

In verse 10, Job states "But he knows the way that I take; when he has tried me, I shall come out as gold." This calls to mind Shawn's lesson last Sunday from 1 Peter chapter 1. Specifically, verses 6-7: "In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith – more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Christ." Although Job's statement is very similar, I do not read it to mean the same thing. In 1 Peter, God's intentions are clear:

trials have a way of refining us. They are undoubtedly for our good. I am not convinced Job believes this. Based on his desire to lay his arguments before God, Job is not persuaded that God means this for his good in any sense. When Job says he will “come out as gold,” he means that try as God may, God will not find a fault in him. Job then expands on his reasons in verses 11-12: he has kept to God’s way and “has not departed from the commandments of his lips.” Job will also return to this thought in much more detail in his summary defense (chapters 29-31).

In verse 13, Job reasons that God is “unchangeable,” which I believe means that God cannot be reasoned with or persuaded. Job finishes that thought by reasoning that God will accomplish what he desires to be Job’s fate. The thought of how Job is unable to change God’s mind terrifies him (verses 15-16). The meaning of verse 17 is not clear, as it has been translated in various ways. The ESV reads “yet I am not silenced because of the darkness, nor because thick darkness covers my face.” “Silenced” can also mean “cut off,” and “because of” could mean “before,” so the idea could have to do with Job wishing God has cut him off (allowed him to die) while he was yet in his prosperity so that he would have been spared this misery. If we read it as the ESV rendered it, it could be a retort to Eliphaz’s statement in chapter 22:11 that Job was covered in darkness, so that he cannot see. The imagery is also present in verses 13-14 of chapter 22 when Eliphaz is misquoting Job as arguing God cannot see what happens on earth because thick clouds veil him from us. If this is the proper rendering and context of chapter 23:17, then Job may mean that he sees well enough to speak truth about his suffering, unlike his friends who are wrong in what they have determined to be the cause.

In chapter 24, Job elaborates on his observations that the wicked are not punished by God for their wickedness. He also broadens his point by making it not only about how the wicked are not punished, but also how the righteous and helpless suffer at the hands of the wicked. For example, in verses 5-12: “the poor go out to their toil, seeking game (food); the wasteland yields food for their children. They gather their fodder in the field, and they glean the vineyard of the wicked man. They lie all night naked, without clothing, and have no covering in the cold. They are wet with the rain of the mountains and cling to the rock for lack of shelter. There are those who snatch the fatherless child from the breast, and they take a pledge against the poor. They go about naked, without clothing; hungry, they carry the sheaves; among the olive rows of the wicked they make oil; they tread the winepresses, but suffer thirst. From out of the city the dying groan, and the soul of the wounded cries for help; yet God charges no one with wrong.” Job continues these thoughts throughout the chapter, going into more and more egregious examples of how the poor are at the mercy of the wicked. The chapter is devoted to Job’s observations on injustices that God allows. In Job’s estimation, God even blesses with wicked in their efforts: “Yet God prolongs the life of the mighty by his power; they rise up when they despair of life. He gives them security, and they are supported, and his eyes are upon their ways” (verses 22-23). Again, Job does not argue that God is unable to see what goes on “down here” as Eliphaz has misinterpreted him to say. Rather, God both sees it and permits it. In verse 25, Job challenges his friends: “If it is not so, who will prove me a liar and show that there is nothing in what I say?”

To harmonize this chapter with what Job has previously spoken, I think it is important for us to once again recall that Job is not stating how he thinks things should be, but rather how they are. Job is not blaming God. On the contrary, Job accepts the fact that God accomplishes whatever he desires. Job is rather using these observations as evidence of his own innocence. If bad things happen to good people, then maybe Job’s friends are wrong about why Job is suffering. And rather than trying to interpret these events in a way that might bring him comfort, Job insists on not compromising intellectual honesty. As he states later on in chapter 27:3-4: “as long as my breath is in me, and the spirit of God is in my nostrils, my lips will not speak falsehood, and my tongue will not utter deceit.” Although Job is correct in his

observation that injustices happen in this life, the rest of the bible that we have now clearly reveals that God will judge everyone, and that Sheol is not merely the equalizing fate of the righteous and the wicked alike.

Did you see anything in these two chapters that interested or challenged you?

Our plan will be to start working through Bildad's final argument and Job's response on Sunday. The section of argument between Job and his friends is quickly reaching its close!