

## The Exiled Nation (585-535 BCE)

### *Job and the Problem of Suffering*

Readings: *Job 22:1-24:25*

#### ***Reflections:***

- We now begin the third and final round of speeches. Eliphaz begins by declaring that God is impartial because whether someone is righteous or not has no bearing on God.
- He then rehashes again that Job's suffering must be the result of his sin. He declares that Job must be committing sins of injustice against the vulnerable and poor. Eliphaz then once again says things that are incredibly discouraging and judgmental to Job. He compares Job's situation to the days of Noah and God's judgment against the wicked. "Will you keep to the old path that evil men have trod? They were carried off before their time, their foundations washed away by a flood."
- Eliphaz then states that he does not listen to the counsel of those who are prosperous, referring to Job's previous wealth, because their lifestyle reveals their wickedness. He then goes on to say that the innocent, in other words, Job's three friends, see the ruin of the wicked, such as Job, and rejoice. "...the innocent mock them, saying, 'Surely our foes (so much for being friends) are destroyed and fire devours their wealth.'" These words, although not said as personal judgments but as basic truths, ultimately reveal that in fact they are very personal judgments against Job by his friends who are at the same time declaring that they are righteous. A good reminder that when people are in pain, they don't need to have explained about how WE think they got into their painful circumstance. They need our grace and presence.
- Eliphaz's final words are wonderful and true and yet in their basic assumption leave Job alone and cold. Eliphaz's final statement in Job 22:21-30 reads like a beautiful psalm of David. "Submit to God and be at peace with him; in this way prosperity will come to you." Eliphaz says everything that we should expect from someone who has completely embraced a legalistic view of God. Fulfill the righteous rules and be blessed. Break the righteous rules and be judged. Now in this final speech it is just the good side: promises and encouragements to be righteous. Again, Eliphaz is saying many wonderful things: cherish God's words in your heart, make God your highest wealth, and return wholeheartedly to God. These are great encouragements. Yet, there is one small word that makes it all go bad: "Surely." Eliphaz believes that living righteously and completely

abandoned to God will guarantee blessing. This is where the truth then becomes like a club that beats down and wounds those who hear it. What does Eliphaz guarantee the righteous? Everything we all want, especially when we are in pain. "God will see you. God will hear you. God will enable you to keep your vows, or in other words, complete your sense of calling before God. Job's vows were representative of his covenanted commitment to God to care for the poor and outcast. We see that in the final verses of Eliphaz speech as he speaks of Job being used as a redeemer of the broken and needy. "He (that being God) will deliver even one who is not innocent, who will be delivered through the cleanness of your hands." In other words, if Job would get his life right with God, he could return to being used by God to redeem other people in need. Eliphaz even goes on in this final verse to suggest that Job's righteousness could enable him to save someone who is not innocent. Job could be that kind of redeemer. Obviously, for those that know the story of Jesus, it is easy to make that connection here. But there is another perspective that jumps out: It is interesting that Job's friends did not have the righteousness to help deliver Job, who they were claiming must have sinned. Their words of judgment and repute hardly align with what Eliphaz is declaring to Job. "When men are brought low and you say, 'Lift them up!' then he (God) will save the downcast." Why weren't his friends interceding for Job and praying for God to restore their downcast friend? Eliphaz's final words betray that he and his friends were in fact failing Job as they judged him rather than simply praying for him.

- Job again replies to these incredibly discouraging words. He actually doesn't respond to Eliphaz at first but simply cries out how he wishes he could draw near to God. It is clear Job just wants to be heard by God. "No, he would not press charges against me" can also be translated, "There God would pay attention to me." I think this second translation is a better one as it is Job's plea just to be heard by God. Those who are suffering or in pain are desperate for God to notice them, to hear them.
- In his longing to find God and to draw near his presence, Job says, "There an upright man could present his case before him, and I would be delivered forever from my judge." In this statement, who is the righteous man? Is it Job defending himself? Is it Job's backhanded way of saying to Eliphaz, if you were righteous, you would be interceding for me and delivering me the way you declared yourself? Or again is there a prophetic longing for and looking to the future when a righteous man would one day stand in God's presence and bring deliverance to all those in need? In a sense, all three are worth considering and maybe the way Job is written with both a personal element of Job before God, a relational element with Job and his friends, and an eternal element as Job looks ahead to the coming of a redeemer, that all three may well be in view.
- Job, in his search for God, remains confident that he is and will remain innocent through this time of suffering: "But he knows the way that I take..." (Although Job can't find God, God is always fully aware of everything Job does.) "...when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold." As Eliphaz declared, if Job would pursue God and cherish his words, then

God would deliver Job. Job's response is, "I have kept to his way..., I have not departed from the commands of his lips; I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my daily bread." Job response to Eliphaz is that in fact Job is doing exactly what Eliphaz told him he should do and yet he remains in his suffering.

- This sets up Job's most pointed response to Eliphaz and where it would seem that Job is starting to cross the line in his attitude toward God. Eliphaz began by declaring that God is impartial. Job now in his final response to Eliphaz declares that God is not just impartial but indifferent. "He does whatever he pleases." "Why does the Almighty (referring to God's power) not set times of judgment (in other words, times to set the records straight)? Why must those who know him (Job referring to committed relationship to God) look in vain for such days?" We see here Job is declaring God's indifference.
- Job then goes on to clearly outline what it means to live in wickedness or without righteousness:
  - Moving boundary stones (secretly stealing from others)
  - Drive away the orphan's donkey (not help an orphan who can't help him or herself)
  - Take a widow's ox in pledge (victimize the powerless by knowingly setting yourself to take what they have because you know they don't have the resources to pay the loan)
  - Knock the needy from the path (make it hard for people to do life or business)
  - Force all the poor into hiding (add to their poverty, a sense of hiding out of view) Note: we don't like to see the poor because it makes us feel badly and so we want them to be out of view. This underscores their powerless position as they live in isolation.
- Job then describes the plight of the poor that have been oppressed by the wicked:
  - Their children must live on the worst of what is available.
  - They become dependent on the wicked, caught in a cycle of dependency ("glean in the vineyards of the wicked" rather than the wicked helping the poor to get their own vineyards – a form of economic slavery).
  - Completely vulnerable and exposed ("naked").
  - "The fatherless child" is taken away from the poor widow, "an infant of the poor is seized for a debt" – children of the poor are the most vulnerable and often victimized.
  - They work but get no benefit from their work.

- Now Job again crosses a line: “The groans of the dying rise from the city, and the souls of the wounded cry out for help. But God charges no one with wrongdoing.” We see Job declaring God’s indifference to injustice and oppression by the wicked.
- He doesn’t stop there. He goes on to describe how the wicked sneak around in the darkness doing all of their evil, thinking they will be hidden by the darkness. Yet, God will come to judge them with great power. As Job comes to the conclusion of this speech, we again see him cross the line: “For a little while they are exalted, and then they are gone; they are brought low and gathered up...LIKE ALL OTHERS; they are cut off like heads of grain.” Job declares that God’s judgment against humanity is indiscriminant. It is like a harvest when all the wheat are cut down, the wicked and the righteous together. Eliphaz said “God is impartial.” Job replies, “..And indifferent.”
- Job’s final words, “If this is not so, who can prove me false and reduce my words to nothing.” Job in this third round of speeches is no longer defending his innocence but now is starting to declare that God is indifferent to the plight of the poor and righteous. Again, for those suffering, it is very easy to end up in that headspace. We find it very easy in moments where it seems God is not answering us, not responding to us, to begin to think that he doesn’t care. As we will see with Jesus, the message of the cross and the coming of Christ demonstrate for all time and eternity that God has not abandoned us but has drawn near and has entered into our suffering that he might be with us (“the fellowship of his suffering” Paul declares in Philippians 3:10). The coming of the Spirit to enter our lives demonstrates for all time and eternity that God will never leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). Job does not yet know this hope in Christ, and so he despairs. This leaves us with a good question: In areas of our own pain, do we despair and not know this hope in Christ? Or do we draw near to Christ knowing that he is right with us and will never abandon us?