

The Exiled Nation (585-535 BCE)

Job and the Problem of Suffering

Readings: *Job 4:1-7:21*

Reflections:

- We now begin a number of discourses between Job and his friends. The first to speak is Eliphaz. He is called Eliphaz the Temanite. He supposedly is from the important city of Edom (See Amos 1:12; Obadiah 9, and Jeremiah 49:20). He appears to represent the wisdom of the Edomites which was famous in antiquity (Obad. 8; Jeremiah 49:7 – Also see Baruch 3:22). He has a gracious and gentle tone and yet his words and wisdom cause Job further pain. It would seem that Eliphaz represents those well-intentioned people who really do care and really are trying to be helpful but they approach suffering from a human wisdom point of view. They have good things to say but they don't understand suffering and they don't know how to truly care for those in pain.
- Eliphaz feels compelled to speak although he is trying to be sensitive to Job. He first tries to encourage him to return to confidence because of his past success and strength. Here we see right off the top that Eliphaz is basically appealing to Job's own strength. "Pull yourself up by the bootstraps!"
- His second main point is pointing Job to the principle of sowing and reaping. If you are righteous, you will reap righteousness and blessing. If you sow evil, you will reap judgment. Although the principle of sowing and reaping is generally true, if it is applied like a magical law that never has exceptions than it can result in a backhanded slap in the face. Eliphaz is basically trying to nicely say that either God is going to bail you out because you are righteous or else you must deserve this because of some sin.
- Job 4:12-16 is a fascinating passage. It appears that Eliphaz has received some form of spiritual communication although the identity of this being is completely veiled to him. It is a spirit that caused him to be afraid, it appeared to him and spoke in a hushed voice. Is this an angel from God or Satan? What the being says gives it away. "Can a mortal be more righteous than God? ...If God places no trust in his servants, if he charges his angels with error, how much more those who live in houses of clay, whose foundations are in the dust, who are crushed more readily than a moth!" It would appear that this indeed was Satan speaking to Eliphaz and deceiving him to look at God

as a judge who is without grace. It would seem that we are given in this parable a window into the meta-narrative. It casts Satan as being bitter that God charged the angels that rebelled with error and he assumes that the pathetic humans, whom he apparently despised for having been made of dust, would suffer the same judgment for their sin. This section of this mysterious being speaking may end with this statement: "Call if you will, but who will answer you? To which of the holy ones will you turn?" It would seem in this section that Eliphaz is influenced by Satan and as he repeats what he has heard he is speaking some very terrible words, suggesting that God would not hear his cry for help but acknowledges that there are other spiritual beings he can call for help.

- Eliphaz' next words return to the first-person and so it would appear that it returns to his personal thoughts. Here he again appeals to God's power and ability to bless and rescue Job. Yet again, Eliphaz's perspective is that God is a perfect judge that blesses the righteous and curses the wicked. Therefore Job must submit to the suffering he is experiencing as "discipline" from the Lord. If he submits to God's correction than he can expect to be healed. Now this would be helpful if in fact the issue was that Job sinned but since he didn't sin, these words are terribly judgmental and hurtful to Job. Job 5:17-26 is similar to many Psalms. God will bless you, he will rescue you, he will fill your life with good things. This sort of physical prosperity was intrinsic with the notion of keeping the law and dwelling in the Promised Land. And yet, in the story of "what doesn't work" we discover that Israel is never able to actually receive this blessing. In this case though, Job has not sinned and so this promise is like pouring alcohol on a wound. Eliphaz ends with bold confidence: "We have examined this, and it is true. So hear it and apply it to yourself." Here Eliphaz perfectly models the self-righteous insensitive part of all of us that wants to give pat answers that basically blames people who are suffering. We feel we have really helped them by pointing this out and now they just need to listen to us and do what we have said. It is no wonder that Job in his response is really ticked off!
- Job right off the bat refuses to eat what Eliphaz is serving up. "I refuse to touch it, such food makes me ill!"
- Job rejects the "pull yourself up by the bootstraps" mentality of Eliphaz: "Do I have any power to help myself, now that success has been driven from me?"
- He mourns that his friends are failing him with such words: "A despairing man should have the devotion of his friend, even though he forsakes the fear of the Almighty." Here Job gives counsel to all those who would sit with those in pain. Those who are suffering may give up in trusting the power of God to save them (another way to say "forsake the fear of the Almighty"). What they need is companionship and constant care of a friend, not words that sound religious and self-righteous but basically discourage and dishearten the person in pain.

- Job rejects the words of his friend, challenges him to find fault with what Job is saying and then again declares his broken, diseased and apparently hopeless condition. In fact Job gives us insight into his psychological suffering as well. “When I think my bed will comfort me...even then you frighten me with dreams and terrify me with visions, so that I prefer strangling and death, rather than this body of mine.” Job continues to direct all of his hopelessness and despair to God. Although Job declares that his suffering is not the result of his sin, he questions what could his sin really do to God. Why would God attack him so fiercely for something that really does nothing to harm God? How can it be sin that is the cause of his suffering because couldn't God just forgive the sin?
- Job's final words again underscore his hopeless condition: “For I will soon lie down in dust; you will search for me, but I will be no more.” Job concludes by going back to the words of that mysterious being. Yes, Job acknowledges, he is made of dust and he will soon return to dust. Job doesn't deny his vulnerability or weakness but simply owns it and accepts it.
- This section reminds the reader to beware of their source of wisdom or spiritual insight when confronting real suffering. Human wisdom or unholy insight will try to paint God's will as karmic justice – good people get good things and bad people get bad things. Although in the ultimate sense of eternity this is true, this does not fully apply to this life. There are other reasons why suffering comes to us beyond just a “cause and effect” relationship to our sin. In the case of this parable, the cause of Job's suffering is that God is no longer providing a special protection over Job and Satan is allowed to inflict him with suffering as a way to reveal whether Job really trusts God or if it is just based on Job having been blessed physically. Again, if we see this as historical narrative, we run into a major moral dilemma with God's actions. Yet, within the story of a parable, we can see that this is just a dramatic story created to help us wrestle with these difficult issues and to understand what isn't true about the suffering of the righteous. Again, as we look ahead to the coming of Jesus, we will see the ultimate revelation of God's heart in reaching out to share fully in our suffering.