THE SUFFERINGS OF JOB

Bildad Speaks (8)

The second of Job's friends begins with less deference than the first. Eliphaz showed some initial reserve, at least at the beginning, but without ceremony Bildad bluntly accuses Job of being an empty windbag (8:1-2). His point of departure is Job's bewilderment and searching questions, which he takes to be impugning God's justice. Fastening, then, on this perceived indictment of the Almighty, Bildad zeros in on why he thinks Job's protestation of innocence is false (8:3). Unlike Eliphaz, who buttressed his case with an appeal to mystical dreams and visions, Bildad appeals to the wisdom of the ancients.

He starts by suggesting that if Job's children were killed, it must certainly have been a deserved judgment (8:4). Hence, Job himself should take warning! If he will repent, he will not suffer the same sad consequence but will be restored (8:5-7). In this context, then, he draws from the wisdom of his forebears (8:8). Since Job, at best, can only offer the wisdom of a single lifetime, what right had he to question the accumulated and proven wisdom of the ancients (8:9-10)?

William Blake's 1793 engraving shows Job's rebuke by his friends, while his wife looks on.

Bildad now cites some of this ancient wisdom. The aphorism, "Can papyrus rise up without a swamp? Can reeds grow where there is no water?" features rhetorical questions that stand in contrast to the rapidity with which such plants wither if cut off from their water source (8:11-12). It is the old "no smoke without fire" adage. Bildad understands this proverb to demonstrate the brevity of blessing for the profane who neglect God (8:13). Their prosperity is as fragile as a spider's web (8:14-15),[1] as unenduring as a garden plant that shrivels in the hot sun despite the fact that its roots spread over the whole garden (8:16-17).

[1] Lit., "house of a spider"

It is only fit for uprooting and short-lived joy (8:18-19).[2]

Bildad's insinuation, then, is that Job must be such a profane man who has forgotten God. His conclusion is blunt: God will not reject a blameless man, and therefore, Job must be blamed (8:20). Still, Job can find restoration and good times if he will only admit his guilt (8:21-22).

The Bildads of the religious community have hardly gone away, people who have simplistic answers to complex questions. Job had questions, of course, deep and agonizing questions. The fact that he would not accept simplistic answers angered Bildad, who took the line that if Job disagreed with him, he disagreed with the ancients (not to mention God). He continued to treat Job like an intellectual midget, drilling him with condescending truisms and the logic that if a host of other people agree with him, especially people in the past, then he (and they) must be right. Good things happen to good people, and bad things happen to bad people. It was all so very simple!

Job Responds (9-10)

Once again, it is important to consider Job's tone and, as before, with the caveat that any conclusion carries the risk of misunderstanding. It is not uncommon for commentators to read his response as sarcastic, belligerent, bitter, or even faithless—and some would go so far as to say that he finally succumbs to the *satan's* confident assertion that he would curse God. Given some of Job's sharp language, of course, this is one way to read the text. However, it is not the only way to read it, and I would suggest that some of these approaches fail to do justice to the context of Job's suffering. Job is not engaged in a detached philosophical discussion about the abstractions of divine ethics. He is a man who is beset with unending physical pain, horrific memories of the loss of his children, and the destruction of everything he held dear. Small wonder that his language, even about God, is affected by his extreme circumstances. In any case, I, along with other scholars, take a more moderate view of Job's mood and am less inclined to censure him despite his edgy words. People in extreme pain are apt to frame their words in language that reflects their agony, but this need not be taken as an expression of faithlessness.

Next, it is important to recognize a controlling metaphor in Job's response, the metaphor of two disputants appearing in court. Small claims in the ancient Near East were usually adjudicated in the city gate by the city elders, sometimes by a magistrate appointed by the king, and sometimes, in the case of a city-state, by the king himself. In such disputes, the two parties in conflict would each present their cases, and here Job contemplates what it would be like if he should be able to stand alongside God and state his case. The irony, of course, is that the other contender in this court case would, in fact, be God. The language of lawsuit is unmistakable throughout, and the impossibility of resolution in such a lawsuit between a human and God is obvious. As poet James Weldon Johnson quaintly puts it, "Your arm's too short to box with God."

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[2] All scholars concede that these passages are difficult, both because of differences between the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint, but also because a number of the Hebrew words have multiple meanings. Hence, one will find considerable variation in the English renderings. Compare, for instance, the translation of 8:19a, "Now he rots on the roadside... (NAB, NJB) with "Behold, this is the joy of his way..." (RSV, NASB, ESV) with "Surely its life withers away..." (NEB, NIV, NIB). Still, the gist of the passage seems clear enough—the short life-span of the garden plant parallels the short-lived prosperity of those who neglect God.

Job begins by acknowledging the general truth of Eliphaz' and Bildad's argument, that is, that no human could be purer than God (cf. 4:17) and that God is always just (cf. 8:3). Nonetheless, such truisms do not answer the question that if one were to appear in court with God, how could a mere human possibly have a chance of arguing his case (9:1-3)? God is, well, God! He has unlimited wisdom and strength, he causes volcanos and earthquakes, he regulates the whole celestial world, including the well-known constellations, and his astounding actions are beyond number (9:4-10). Though Job echoes the words of Eliphaz (cf. 5:9//9:10), his understanding of God is not the same as Eliphaz. Eliphaz cites God's great acts in support of his thesis that Job should not despise divine discipline, but Job describes God's great acts as evidence of his transcendence and unfathomableness. Indeed, it is this transcendence that is at the heart of Job's dilemma. God is always beyond him (9:11). No one can thwart God's work, not even the chaos monster of the deep (9:12-13), much less a puny human (9:14)![3]

Even if Job felt he was in the right, he was in no position to argue his case with God, since, as he already has stated, such an effort would be futile (cf. 9:3, 11-14). He could only appeal for mercy before the judge (9:15). God is not like someone who must answer a subpoena; even if God showed up, Job would have a hard time believing that God would take him seriously (9:16). In the crucible of his suffering, it only seemed that God was crushing him unmercifully (9:17-19). Hence, even if Job thought he was in the right, he can see no way forward toward vindication.[4] God sees the most intimate thoughts of every man's life and penetrates to the deepest recesses of every man's motives. Anything Job might say would no doubt end up being faulty before such a perfect and lofty Being. Hence, Job resigns himself to self-loathing (9:20-21). Eliphaz and Bildad have asserted that good people receive blessing while sinners receive punishment—and both in the present life (4:7-9; 8:4-7)! Job says just the opposite—that both the blameless and the wicked experience disaster (9:22-23). When an epidemic or a natural disaster happens, doesn't it strike both good and bad, and isn't God the one who has the power to control such things—and if not him, who else could it possibly be? Many centuries later, Jesus will say essentially the same thing,

[3] As before (cf. 7:12), Job refers to the monster of the sea from ancient Near Eastern mythology. Rahab is one of several names for this primeval dragon whom Yahweh is poetically described as defeating in creation (cf. Job 26:12; Ps. 89:10; Is. 51:9). A number of Old Testament and Apocalyptic passages employ the mythological imagery of this dragon-like creature opposing God. The monster is variously called *Leviathan* (Job 3:8; 41:1; Ps. 74:14; Is. 27:1; cf. 2 Esdras 6:49, 52), *Behemoth* (Job 40:15-24; cf. 1 Enoch 60:7-9; 4 Ezra 6:49-52), *Rahab* (Job 9:13; 26:12; Ps. 89:10; Is. 30:7; 51:9), *Tannin* (= dragon, Job 7:12; Ps. 74:13; Is. 27:1; 51:9), *Yam* (= Sea, Job 7:12; Ps. 74:13; Is. 51:10; Hab. 3:8), *Nahar* (= River, Ps. 93:3; Hab. 3:8) and *Nahash* (= Snake, Job 26:13; Is. 27:1).

[4] As with 9:15, the Hebrew text of 9:20 begins with the important word אִם, making the statement hypothetical. Job is not claiming perfection, but rather, he is saying that even if he were perfect, he knows that as a mere human he cannot carry out a successful self-defense before the awesome perfection of Almighty God.

although from the more positive side, “For he [i.e., the Father] makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Mt. 5:45). The assertions of Eliphaz and Bildad, that a man’s fortunes inevitably reflect his moral character and behavior, flies in the face of all experience. Due to pervasive wickedness in the world, even the judges seem blindfolded when it comes to fixing blame (9:24).

Job now lapses into a reflection on the brevity of life, using metaphors of runners, papyrus boats, and diving eagles to describe his fast-vanishing days (9:25-26). He is afraid to be optimistic, since another bout of suffering might follow (9:27-28a). Being treated like a man condemned, unable to cleanse himself by any ablution, he feels his plight to be hopeless (9:28b-31). Hence, he longs for some mediator, some friend of the court who, as it were, could put his arms around both God and Job, bringing them together (9:32-33). What he truly longs for, of course, will not be fully answered until the incarnation of the Son of God, the one who knows the very heart of the Father and yet who was made like humans in every way so that he could serve as their priest and mediator (cf. He. 2:17). But such an answer was so distant from Job that he could hardly imagine it. In the meantime, he only pleads that the “rod” of the Almighty be taken away so that he might speak to God directly and without fear. This, then, is at the very heart of the book (9:34-35). It is this transcendent difference between God and humans, this unbridgeable gulf that separates them—what Soren Kierkegaard called the infinite qualitative difference—with which Job struggles.

Job continues to struggle with the question, “Why?” (10:1-2). He ended his initial response with a series of “whys” (7:20-21). Once again, he voices to God this fundamental question, “Let me know why you bring suit against me?” It is, in fact, the age-old question lying behind every tragedy, the question, “Why?” Job toys with the possibilities, some of them dark, to say the least. Did God somehow derive perverse pleasure from watching humans suffer or bestowing benefits to the wicked (10:3)? Is God operating on merely a human level (10:4-7)? If so, Job could understand it better, but he cannot accept the idea that God actually operates this way. The origin of humans in creation seems to demonstrate God’s goodness, and Job uses a series of metaphors to describe this divine action, the analogy of the potter, the analogy of the cheese-maker, and the analogy of the weaver, all of them probably reflections on human creation in Ge. 2:7 (10:8-11). If God was the celestial craftsman, his designs were thoughtfully produced and wonderfully made, for he granted life to the human creature he formed and extended to him loyal love and the privilege of overseeing the world (10:12-13). If this is God’s basic character, and it is good, how then could such tragedy have happened to Job, one of his faithful creatures? Job is struggling with his faith, but there is no compelling reason to think he has given it up. Indeed, struggle and even doubt are constituent parts of any examined faith!

So, Job continues to question. Does it make any difference whether he is righteous or not? If he sins, God will certainly know it, and if he is righteous, he still finds no vindication. If he is elevated, he will surely be hunted down by the divine Lion. In all cases, he seems condemned and under the displeasure of God, always under threat from God’s “troops” (10:14-17). Hence, back to the basic question, “Why?” the question that echoes his opening lament (cf. 3:11-12, 16, 20, 23). “Why was I born?” “Would it not have been better to have been still-born?” “Can God not simply leave me alone before I descend to the underworld of darkness and death?” (10:18-22).