

JOB 15-21

The dialogue between Job and his friends continues in these chapters. Even though many of the themes are familiar by now, the issues between them come to the surface more clearly. The friends are more open about the fact that Job is suffering because he is a sinner and has done wrong. Job is franker about their failure as friends and their faulty theology about the world, God and human fate. The universe doesn't hold together by a moral code. In spite of his despair, however, Job glimpses something more hopeful. Is it possible that his cause will be vindicated, even beyond his death? Will there be one to mediate on his behalf before God? Will God answer?

15: 1-16 Eliphaz speaks once again and repeats some of the now familiar responses to Job. First of all, Job's brazen talk about and praying to God reveals his arrogance. Job is acting as if he is the only one to see the truth about things, forgetting that the faith in which he was nurtured and his friends continue to defend, is very ancient, grounded in the wisdom of many generations. Second, this only reveals that Job is, indeed, what they suspected all along: "abominable and corrupt, one who drinks iniquity like water." (16) His severe misfortune is not accidental.

15: 17-35 Again the familiar is repeated. Those who are wicked, even if they prosper for a while, will get what's coming to them. Those who deal in bribes and deceit (34-35), who are defiant before God (25), who are plain wicked (20), will not end their days happily. Job's arrogance and defiance displays wickedness that was hidden before.

16: 1-22 Job responds again in words that are familiar, but even more raw. First of all he rebukes his friends for being cruel comforters. It's easy to condemn him from where they sit and not see the injustice of his situation. They have not been shaken and shattered out of their straightforward faith about the way things are. (1-5) Once again Job tells of how God has raged against him and reduced him to a "shriveled" shadow of a man. On top of that he has been cursed with friends who mock and wound him with their words. But he continues to maintain his innocence: "My face is red with weeping, and deep darkness is on my eyelids, though there is no violence in my hands and my prayer is pure." (16-17) His one hope, it seems, is that his life, his witness, his cause survive him, that somehow God would, God may, respond and vindicate him.

17: 1-16 Job now offers a warning to his friends. Their denunciation of him may come back to haunt them, cursing them. But then he again falls into hopelessness about his life and his imminent end. However, he asks: Who will see my hope? Will it go down to the bars of Sheol?" (15-16) Is there a chance that his cause will survive him and God will vindicate his cause beyond his life? There is no precedent for this idea in the traditional faith. Remember, the resurrection was not a core teaching of the Jewish faith at this time.

18: 1-21 Bildad now speaks. He repeats himself. The wicked will not only suffer a terrible fate themselves. But they will not be remembered after they die, nor will they have offspring to carry their name. Fears will overtake them while they are alive and they will not die in peace.

19: 1-12 Job rebukes his friends again. Have they no shame denouncing him from their place of comfort, confident in their faith and their righteousness? They make his “humiliation an argument against” him. (5) God has wronged him. Not only has God treated Job as an enemy, but God has worn him down, broken down any shred of hope he may have had. God has wronged Job and even though Job cries out for justification, there is only silence from God.

19: 13-19 Job’s family and friends, relatives and servants – everyone who would have respected and loved him in the past – have turned away from him and rejected him. Job has become repulsive and intolerable to everyone. He is cursed and no one wants to be near him.

19: 20-22 He pleads with his friends in desperation: why do you treat me so badly like God is doing? Job is mere skin and bones. To “escape with the skin of his teeth” is no escape at all, since teeth have no skin.

19: 23-29 Even though these verses have been made famous by Handel’s *Messiah* they are easily misunderstood. Job’s faint hope, again, is that somehow, his cause may survive him by being inscribed in stone. He is hoping for someone – a “redeemer” - to defend his cause even after he is gone (for he doesn’t anticipate surviving much longer). He can almost taste his desire for vindication. It almost makes God present as the One to give account, even though God is Job’s enemy. Again, his friends are warned. Their false accusations of Job may come back to harm them.

20: 1-29 Zophar speaks. He rebukes Job for rebuking him and the others. Again, he stands behind a faith that has been around for centuries. There must be something to it, certainly much more than Job’s crazy questioning and raging. Again, the fate of the wicked is rehearsed. What’s interesting is the further description of the wicked Zophar offers, which tells us about the ancient conception of moral integrity and its opposite. The wicked not only lack generosity, but through their greed and thieving they neglect and rob the poor. Their thirst for gain has no limit and they respect no human except the one who has money or power. Their destruction is sure.

21: 1-34 Job responds by totally contradicting Zophar’s faith in what happens to the wicked in this life. The wicked prosper in every way. They become rich, they have many children, they die

in old age. They reject God in their arrogance and get away with it unscathed. Some may believe that if the wicked don't get what should be coming to them, their children will. Job doesn't buy it. Human suffering or prospering doesn't follow a moral code. Injustice reigns. Job's personal experience has opened his eyes to a whole other side of reality.

Once again, then, Job and his friends are offering arguments against each other's points of view. What is different, though, is that whereas the friends were gentler in bringing up their criticisms of Job before, they are open in denouncing him now and defending the traditional faith as if the whole world believes it and Job is alone in standing against it. Job on his part is now open not only to the falsity of their faith, but the cruelty of their words, which he believes may come back to damage them. Moreover, not only does he continue to claim he is unjustly treated by God, but that injustice is a pervasive element throughout human civilization, regardless of what his friends want to believe. Finally, and even more fascinating, Job is calling upon God to show God's face, to justify what God has done to Job. Even if Job dies, may his cause continue to be put forth until God can do no other but speak to it and justify God's actions.

Does this kind of persistent pleading and praying by Job work? Does it get a response? Think about suffering Israel reading itself into Job. Think about so many who have suffered with their cries going up to God. Will God respond? What will God's response be?