

JOB 4-7

In chapters 4-5, the first of Job's friends – Eliphaz – offers a response to Job's initial outburst in chapter 3, and Job then responds to Eliphaz in chapters 6-7. Even though there is an attempt at dialogue here, it is also the case that Eliphaz and Job are speaking past each other. Eliphaz has not really heard Job even though Job has been speaking loud and clear. Let us analyze the content of the speeches in greater detail.

ELIPHAZ SPEAKS:

4: 1-11 Eliphaz reminds Job of the traditional faith that Job has held all his life, the same faith that Eliphaz and his friends still hold. This faith is that the innocent and righteous are never abused by God but succeed in life. Good befalls them, not evil. Those who experience evil must question where they have gone wrong, for evil is definitely some reproof from God. It is a communication from God calling for attention and response. Will the wicked forsake their way or continue on a downward course?

4: 12-21 Eliphaz speaks of some experience he's had where God revealed God's self to him during the night in a vivid dream of sorts. The revelation is that human beings are fragile, flawed and imperfect. They can never stand before God on an even footing. They are constantly dependent on God's sustenance and forgiving grace. Humans are here today and gone tomorrow. They forget their total dependence on God at their peril.

5: 1-16 Eliphaz speaks of those who are foolish (3), jealous (2), crafty (12), schemers (13), those who think they're wise (13). Such people think they can get away with their evil actions without divine justice catching up to them. The traditional faith of Job's friends cannot countenance the thought that justice (punishment) will not find those who are wicked. On the other hand there are those who are humble, those, like Eliphaz, who "would seek God" and commit their cause to God. (8) It is God who creates and sustains the earth and all that is. This same God will save the needy, the poor, and the humble seeker after God. This kind of humble seeking and reverence is the 'integrity' that held Job fast in chapters 1-2. As we shall see, Job can no longer subscribe to this view of things. Will God really save the needy? Will God deal justice to the wicked?

5: 17-27 "How happy is the one whom God reproves; therefore do not despise the discipline of the Almighty. For he wounds, but he binds up; he strikes, but his hands heal." (17-18) With these verses Eliphaz goes on to talk about the blessings that will come once Job or anyone else who is suffering passes their ordeal. But the theology here is very hard to take for poor Job, as we shall see when he responds. Eliphaz is telling Job, in effect, that he is being chastised and disciplined by God. That's the purpose of his suffering. It will make him a better person in the end. But is this the word of a friend? Eliphaz may think he is being truthful, which is what real friends are willing to be. But has he really pondered Job's situation to the point of questioning whether his ideas really hold true to Job's situation and the situation of many in the world?

JOB RESPONDS

6: 1-7 Job protests that he is not arrogant because he doesn't accept his situation before God. If his words are rash (3) they are in proportion to the severity of the "vexation" and "calamity" (2) that has befallen him.

6: 8-13 Job's prayer at this point to God is that God would "crush" him, that he would die. He has no "strength" left in him nor "patience" to wait it all out. (11)

6: 14-30 Job now criticizes Eliphaz and the others as being terrible friends. They have not really taken stock of his suffering. They see Job's calamity and are afraid of it. (21) They are afraid of the force of his honest words (26). Instead of listening to his pain and questioning the order of things, they reprove him for speaking out and questioning God, afraid that their faith will not stand up to reality. They know Job and yet accuse him of having done something to deserve his suffering. There's no way they can question whether it is their view of God that is faulty. The problem has got to be Job according to them.

7: 1-10 Job goes on to express his hopelessness and despair. There is nothing more to live for, hope for, or anticipate that is good.

7: 11-21 Now Job addresses God directly in the presence of his friends. From feelings of hopelessness and despair he shifts to anguished complaint that must cry out. First (12-19), Job questions why God would be so hard on human beings who are but fragile dust. If suffering and calamity are expressions of God's discipline or reproof, better that humans had few dealings with God. God expects too much. Who can measure up before God? Second (20-21), if human beings do inevitably sin and do wrong, why does God have to be so hard on them? Is there no forgiveness in God? Why punish humans so harshly with calamity when they are already vulnerable creatures?

Job's questions remain unanswered for the moment. These questions of God make sense only because Job still holds the traditional view of God like his friends. This view, once again, is that God is in control of everything that is and causes whatever happens to happen. Therefore, evil is the result of God punishing or disciplining a person who has gone wrong. Good is the reward of living a righteous life, humble before God and just toward neighbours. The difference is that while Job's friends uphold this view as true to reality, Job questions it as false. He maintains his integrity before God. Integrity, now, is not about keeping his mouth shut and accepting whatever comes from God as good. No. Integrity, now, is about being honest and transparent before God which means not accepting injustice done to him when he cannot believe it. Even if God will continue to harm him, Job will maintain his integrity whatever it costs. Has he got any more to lose?

Either God is unfair and unjust if God is the cause of Job's suffering, or else, the universe doesn't function on the basis of a moral framework of rewards and punishments. What do you think?