

Job 4: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Job chapter 4 Then Eliphaz the Temanite answered and said, If one ventures a word with you, will you be impatient? Yet who can keep from speaking?

Behold, you have instructed many, and you have strengthened the weak hands. Your words have upheld him who was stumbling, and you have made firm the feeble knees. But now it has come to you, and you are impatient.

It touches you, and you are dismayed. Is not your fear of God your confidence, and the integrity of your ways your hope? Remember, who that was innocent ever perished?

Or where were the upright cut off? As I have seen those who plough iniquity, and sow trouble, reap the same. By the breath of God they perish, and by the blast of his anger they are consumed.

The roar of the lion, the voice of the fierce lion, the teeth of the young lions are broken. The strong lion perishes for lack of prey, and the cubs of the lioness are scattered.

[0 : 57] Now a word was brought to me stealthily. My ear received the whisper of it. Amid thoughts from visions of the night, when deep sleep falls on men, Dread came upon me and trembling, which made all my bones shake.

A spirit glided past my face. The hair of my flesh stood up. It stood still, but I could not discern its appearance. A form was before my eyes. There was silence.

Then I heard a voice. Can mortal man be in the right before God? Can a man be pure before his maker? Even in his servants he puts no trust, and his angels he charges with error.

How much more those who dwell in houses of clay, whose foundation is in the dust, who are crushed like the moth. Between morning and evening they are beaten to pieces. They perish forever, without anyone regarding it.

Is not their tent cord plucked up within them? Do they not die, and that without wisdom? In Job chapter 4 we arrive at the first speech of one of Job's friends.

[1 : 59] There are almost 30 chapters devoted to the three friends' speeches, and to Job's responses to them, with the wisdom poem of chapter 28, and the speeches of Elihu seeming to be somewhat out of place.

The cycle of speeches follows a patterned order. Eliphaz goes first, presumably because he is the oldest. His speeches are the longest of the three friends, although Job's responses to the friends tend to be longer than theirs.

In addition to being the longest speaking friend, he is also the most articulate. His argument tends to be that the righteous are not finally cut off, even when they have sinned. He warns about despising the discipline of God.

Rather, Job must repent and turn to the Lord for restoration. His speeches become more forceful with time. After Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite comes next.

His argument is from the justice of God. Surely God would not pervert justice. If people are suffering, it must be because of sin. Blameless people do not suffer. We are also completely dwarfed by God's majesty.

[2 : 59] Compared to Eliphaz's speeches, Bildad's are quite short. Zophar the Nehemiothite's speeches are about the same length as Bildad's. Zophar is probably the most antagonistic to Job.

He argues that Job is mocking God and must have sinned greatly. The wicked, if they do not repent, will be utterly destroyed. He seeks to interpret Job's life for him. Each speech is responded to by Job.

Job defends his innocence and desires a mediator. He wrestles with despair, with abandonment, suffering and accusation. God is his only hope and he turns to God in confidence.

With words like those of chapter 13 verse 15, Though he slay me, I will hope in him. He displays the conflicted feelings of the sufferer throughout. Eliphaz the Temanite's approach to Job is diplomatic. His speech will recall Job to his past behaviour and knowledge. Though unsure of how he will be heard, he feels duty-bound to speak. He reminds Job of the fact that he has often been in the position of the counsellor to others.

[4 : 01] In those situations Job encouraged and upheld people, and now when he finds himself in difficulty, he doesn't seem to be giving himself the advice that he needs. He summarises his reading of the situation in verse 6.

Is not your fear of God your confidence, and the integrity of your ways your hope? The sense of this does not appear to be sarcastic. Rather, he is stating a point that he presumes that Job will agree with.

The grounds for confidence in a situation of suffering are the fear of the Lord and one's moral uprightness. Eliphaz's words at this point might carry an element of rebuke. Job's curse and lament of the preceding chapter seemed inappropriate, and perhaps to Eliphaz's mind were not the right approach in the situation.

He also recalls Job to the moral principle that the innocent don't perish and the upright are not cut off. Doubtless he would hedge this statement with a number of qualifications. His point, presumably, is that Job's situation is only temporary.

He will not finally be cut off if he is a righteous person. That is where he ought to find his confidence. None of Eliphaz's position really answers Job's concern, however. The reader of the book of Job, unlike Eliphaz, knows from the prologue that Job is indeed an upright man, he is a man who fears the Lord.

[5 : 16] While he may not finally perish, the Lord has nonetheless brought a situation upon him that is so bad that Job is wishing he had never been born. Eliphaz argues for a strong relationship between sowing and reaping.

This is something that we see on several occasions in Scripture. Plowing and sowing trouble and iniquity will lead to a harvest of the same kind. The Lord can bring sudden disaster even upon the strong, here compared to powerful lions.

In verses 12 to 16, Eliphaz describes an uncanny experience he had one night, providing the background for an oracle that he will use to support his point. This is arguably the only description of its kind in the Scripture.

It is an account of a mysterious and strange experience of a spirit at night. Eliphaz's encounter was elusive and fleeting, vague in its details. There was a sense of terror he experienced.

He felt a spirit gliding past his face. He felt its presence, but he could not see its appearance. He then heard a voice, earlier described as something that came to him stealthily, and as a whisper.

[6 : 18] The oracle received by Eliphaz presents human righteousness in the framework of the creator-creature distinction. God's glorious, spotless holiness so exceeds mankind in its sinfulness and frailty that humanity cannot but appear polluted by contrast with it.

If even the heavenly beings are exposed in their faults and their finitude by such holiness, what hope has man? Man was formed from the earth. He dwells in a house of clay. His foundation is in the dust from which he was first formed.

While Eliphaz's points may be largely true, they do speak past Job's plight. Job is not claiming to have a righteousness that compares with God's own righteousness. Rather, he is experiencing bitter distress, and he wants to be vindicated in his righteousness.

A righteousness that the text has already assured us that he actually possesses, and that recognised by God. Job has been completely devastated by the Lord's judgments that have fallen upon him, and to claim, as Eliphaz does, that no man can be perfectly righteous before God is in many respects to cut off his hope.

Eliphaz's question, can mortal man be in the right before God, seems to presume for his mind, as David Clines observes, a negative answer. However, as we look through the rest of the book, it will seem that the Lord actually does hold Job to be righteous before him, not in the more radical sense that Eliphaz might be thinking about here, but in a very real sense nonetheless.

[7 : 44] Using that radical sense of God's holiness eclipsing all human righteousness, to deny the proper sense in which a man can be righteous before the Lord, is not good counsel.

A question to consider. What is a better way to speak about the Lord's surpassing righteousness without denying the possibility of a covenant standing that people can enjoy before him, as righteous, without being gloriously holy or perfectly sinless?

