

Job 5: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Job chapter 5. Call now, is there anyone who will answer you? To which of the holy ones will you turn? Surely vexation kills the fool, and jealousy slays the simple. I have seen the fool taking root, but suddenly I cursed his dwelling. His children are far from safety, they are crushed in the gate, and there is no one to deliver them. The hungry eat his harvest, and he takes it even out of thorns, and the thirsty pant after his wealth. For affliction does not come from the dust, nor does trouble sprout from the ground, but man is born to trouble, as the sparks fly upward.

As for me, I would seek God, and to God would I commit my cause, who does great things and unsearchable, marvellous things without number. He gives rain on the earth, and sends waters on the fields. He sets on high those who are lowly, and those who mourn are lifted to safety. He frustrates the devices of the crafty, so that their hands achieve no success. He catches the wise in their own craftiness, and the schemes of the wily are brought to a quick end. They meet with darkness in the daytime, and grope at noonday as in the night. But he saves the needy from the sword of their mouth, and from the hand of the mighty. So the poor have hope, and injustice shuts her mouth.

Behold, blessed is the one whom God reproves. Therefore despise not the discipline of the Almighty. For he wounds, but he binds up. He shatters, but his hands heal. He will deliver you from six troubles. In seven no evil shall touch you. In famine he will redeem you from death, and in war from the power of the sword. You shall be hidden from the lash of the tongue, and shall not fear destruction when it comes. At destruction and famine you shall laugh, and shall not fear the beasts of the earth. For you shall be in league with the stones of the field, and the beasts of the field shall be at peace with you. You shall know that your tent is at peace, and you shall inspect your fold and miss nothing. You shall know also that your offspring shall be many, and your descendants as the grass of the earth. You shall come to your grave in ripe old age, like a chief gathered up in its season. Behold, this we have searched out. It is true. Hear, and know it for your good. In chapter five we find the second part of Eliphaz's first speech. In the book of Job there are three cycles of speeches by Job's friends. In each cycle Eliphaz begins. Eliphaz is presumably the oldest, his speeches are the longest, they're also the most articulate and eloquent. Bildad comes second, and then Zophar comes last. There are three cycles, and in the third we have Eliphaz, Bildad, and then Zophar does not complete the series. As we proceed through the sequence, each of the speeches is responded to by Job, whose responses are generally longer than the speeches of his friends. In the preceding chapter, while recognizing that Job was essentially a righteous man, Eliphaz had contrasted human righteousness in all its limitations with the transcendent holiness of God. 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. Unlike the wicked, the righteous will not be finally cut off. However, on account of the sin inherently characteristic of human beings, no man has any standing to question the justice of his situation. If Job is going to complain about his situation, who is he going to complain to that will answer him? Eliphaz has already stated that the angels themselves are charged by God with faults. Is Job expecting that they will intercede for him? Anger in such a situation will not do Job any good, it will just eat him up. Eliphaz, to illustrate the principle that he arrives at in verse 7, describes what he has witnessed in seeing a fool flourish.

The fool seemed to flourish for a time, and then Eliphaz cursed his dwelling. The relation of Eliphaz's curse to the fate of the fool is not entirely clear. Is Eliphaz's curse the reason why the fool's house is brought down, or is it introducing the statement of verses 4 and 5 which states the actual curse that Eliphaz made? Or perhaps the point is that he is announcing a curse that the fool

is already under?

[4 : 26] I think that latter option may be nearer to the truth. On account of his wickedness, the fool is under the curse of God, and so when a curse is made against him, it lands, as it were. The fool was suddenly devastated, and the consequences of his downfall are experienced by his children. They lack safety, they are crushed in the gate, and others completely devour their property. The reference to being crushed in the gate probably refers to some sort of oppression, as we see in Proverbs 22, verse 22. Do not rob the poor, because he is poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate. Eliphaz goes on to make his point. Trouble and affliction do not just arise from nature, rather man is the source of his own trouble. He begets trouble just as naturally as the sparks fly upward. Eliphaz's point here is probably not that Job is the fool. It would be particularly insensitive to speak about the fool's children being far from safety, being crushed in the gate, and other things like that, comparing Job to that fool, and suggesting that Job had lost his children for a similar reason. Eliphaz's point is probably building more upon what he said in the preceding chapter. Job, while generally a righteous man, has obviously failed in some regard, viewed from the perspective of God's perfect righteousness. Rather than complain, he should recognize and acknowledge the fault within himself. Job has no grounds to petition God to vindicate him. Rather his response, as Eliphaz argues in verses 8 to 16, should be to throw himself upon the Lord as the one who reverses fortunes. Perhaps God will have mercy upon him and deal with him in his distress. Eliphaz gives a litany of different things that are instances of God's transforming and reversing power. God is the one who breaks the drought, bringing the rains that render the earth fruitful again. He can take the lowly and oppressed and bring them high, and those who mourn can be delivered. Oppressors confident in their powers can be frustrated in their plans. Those who imagine themselves to be in control of their fate and their purposes can find themselves thwarted. The Lord, who sovereignly determines destinies and reverses fortunes, is the one upon whom Job must now cast himself.

Armed with the conceptually reassuring simplicities of his school teaching, Eliphaz now moves to wrapping up his speech, addressing Job more directly. What Job is experiencing is the discipline of the Lord, and he needs to learn from this. Suffering under the Lord's heavy hand, he needs to grow. He needs to understand where he has failed and receive the Lord's rebuke. All of this is familiar teaching from what we find elsewhere in the book of Proverbs, for instance. In teaching also taken up in Hebrews chapter 12. The Lord rebukes and disciplines those that he loves, and so we should receive the chastisement of the Lord's hand, so that we may grow thereby. The problem is that Eliphaz's teaching, no matter how well-intentioned it may be, is highly inapplicable to Job's situation. Eliphaz expatiates on his point, accumulating proverbs that will make it in different forms, concluding his didactic pronouncement with a statement that drives its simplistic dogmas home. Behold, this we have searched out, it is true. Hear, and know it for your good. One of the things that Eliphaz might illustrate at this point is the way that, faced with other people's suffering and difficulty, our concern can often be to protect our own theologies and our certainties. Rather than taking the opportunity to grow in wisdom, Eliphaz is more concerned to defend a brittle dogma.

A question to consider, where are some passages elsewhere in scripture that seem to be making similar points to those that Eliphaz makes here? How would we distinguish between the proper application of those principles and Eliphaz's misapplication of them at this point?

