

Job 15: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Job chapter 15. Then Eliphaz the Temanite answered and said, Should a wise man answer with windy knowledge, and fill his belly with the east wind? Should he argue in unprofitable talk, or in words with which he can do no good? But you are doing away with the fear of God, and hindering meditation before God. For your iniquity teaches your mouth, and you choose the tongue of the crafty. Your own mouth condemns you, and not I. Your own lips testify against you.

Are you the first man who was born, or were you brought forth before the hills? Have you listened in the counsel of God, and do you limit wisdom to yourself? What do you know that we do not know? What do you understand that is not clear to us? Both the grey-haired and the aged are among us, older than your father. Are the comforts of God too small for you, or the word that deals gently with you? Why does your heart carry you away? Why do your eyes flash, that you turn your spirit against God, and bring such words out of your mouth? What is man that he can be pure, or he who is born of a woman that he can be righteous? Behold, God puts no trust in his holy ones, and the heavens are not pure in his sight. How much less one who is abominable and corrupt, a man who drinks injustice like water? I will show you, hear me, and what I have seen I will declare, what wise men have told without hiding it from their fathers, to whom alone the land was given, and no stranger passed among them. The wicked man writhes in pain all his days, through all the years that are laid up for the ruthless. Dreadful sounds are in his ears, in prosperity the destroyer will come upon him. He does not believe that he will return out of darkness, and he is marked for the sword. He wanders abroad for bread, saying, Where is it? He knows that a day of darkness is ready at his hand. Distress and anguish terrify him. They prevail against him like a king ready for battle, because he has stretched out his hand against

God, and defies the Almighty, running stubbornly against him with a thickly-bossed shield. Because he has covered his face with his fat, and gathered fat upon his waist, and has lived in desolate cities, in houses that none should inhabit, which were ready to become heaps of ruins, he will not be rich, and his wealth will not endure, nor will his possessions spread over the earth. He will not depart from darkness. The flame will dry up his shoots, and by the breath of his mouth he will depart.

Let him not trust in emptiness, deceiving himself, for emptiness will be his payment. It will be paid in full before his time, and his branch will not be green. He will shake off his unripe grape like the vine, and cast off his blossom like the olive tree, for the company of the godless is barren, and fire consumes the tents of bribery. They conceive trouble, and give birth to evil, and their womb prepares deceit.

[3 : 0 3] Job chapter 15 begins the second cycle of speeches. Once again, Eliphaz, who is likely the oldest of the friends, opens this new cycle of dialogues. Bildad will come next, and then Zophar. Eliphaz's speech is once again the longest of the speeches of the friends within this particular cycle. The speech can be divided into two halves. The first half, in verses 2-16, is a rebuke of Job, and the second, in verses 17-35, is a portrayal of the wicked man. Job is directly addressed in the first half, but Eliphaz's more powerful statements, perhaps, are found in the insinuations of the second, which portray the wicked man in the third person. But, as Norman Harbel observes, Eliphaz is carefully picking up on the language of Job's earlier speeches in his characterisation of the wicked man. By so doing, he's presenting Job with a picture in which he might recognise elements of his own personality, things that might cause him to reconsider his approach. Eliphaz here adopts a much more confrontational tone than he did in his earlier speech of chapters 4 and 5. He began that speech as follows.

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 needs. 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? Eliphaz had been much more gentle and exhortational in his original speech. But now his tone has markedly changed. Perhaps the change of tone is a sign that Eliphaz feels wounded by the way that Job has responded to his earlier counsel. Eliphaz speaks as if he is genuinely dismayed by Job's response. Job is supposed to be a wise man, yet he is speaking empty, hollow words, coming out with mere hot air. And in the process, he's actually threatening true religion. You are doing away with the fear of the Lord, and hindering meditation before God, as he says in verse 4. Job's speech seems to arise not from the deep meditation of a godly heart, but from sin and vexation. His own words are evidence enough against him that he is not in the right. One of the questions that is at stake in the discourse is the true source of wisdom. In his first speech, Eliphaz had put forward a vision that he had received. Bildad had emphasised the wisdom of the ancients and the tradition, and Zophar had talked about the deeper wisdom of God. Job had acted as if he could gainsay them all. Eliphaz now attacks Job's approach to wisdom. Job is acting as if he was the first man who was born.

Such a man, unlike all subsequent men, was not born of a woman, but was directly created by God himself, and as a result has some privileged knowledge. The first man has some knowledge of the primordial order. He was there before the mountains were brought forth. We might think here of the description of wisdom herself in Proverbs chapter 8 verse 25. Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth. The first man might have claimed access to the divine counsel, hearing the wisdom of God directly from the source. Such a man might have been able to claim a privileged monopoly upon certain knowledge. But Job is clearly not that man. Yet, Eliphaz suggests, he acts as if he were.

In chapter 13 verses 1 to 2, Job had said, Behold, my eye has seen all this, my ear has heard and understood it. What you know, I also know. I am not inferior to you. The strong implication of Job's statement was that he knew more than his friends.

[6 : 46] He was able to challenge and dismiss their opinions. Eliphaz rebukes Job as exhibiting a sort of youthful hubris. There are other wise men around, Eliphaz and perhaps others of the friends, who are older than Job's father. Job's attitude in dismissing the knowledge of such men just seems arrogant. In his original response to Job, Eliphaz had tried to deal quite gently with him. Although in his ignorance his words were ill-tailored for Job's situation, it may seem that he was nonetheless well-intentioned and kindly disposed to Job. He had tried to present Job with what he calls the comforts of God by means of a word that deals gently. If Job wasn't receptive to that, Eliphaz fears that he might be closed off to reason more generally. Eliphaz was confirmed in this impression by Job's spirited and passionate response. The accusatory tone in Job's response to God troubles him. It seems quite unfitting.

In Eliphaz's first speech in chapter 4 in verses 17 to 19, he had presented the content of the vision that he had received in the night. 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.

In concluding the first half of his second speech to Job, Eliphaz returns to these points. Before the infinitely holy God, how can Job imagine himself to be pure? Man is, as the prophet Isaiah described himself, a person of unclean lips among a people of unclean lips. A human being drinks injustice like water. Injustice and sin and iniquity is native to him.

No such man could ever presume to be righteous or pure before God. Clearly God has found some fault in Job, and rather than appealing against the Lord's judgment, Job clearly needs to humble himself beneath the Lord's hand of discipline. The second half of Eliphaz's second speech is a presentation of the figure of the wicked, with a series of images in succession. Eliphaz begins in verses 17 and 19 by stating the grounds upon which he feels legitimated in presenting his wisdom. Eliphaz's earlier wisdom was drawn from a vision, but he argues here that it is consistent with the wisdom of the ancients.

He is not departing from the tradition, he is teaching consistently with it. This is what wise men have passed down consistent with the teaching of their fathers, a tradition that has a pristine source, in a time when the land was free from the influence of foreign thought. As noted earlier, throughout the

second half of his speech, Eliphaz is picking up on elements of Job's own speeches, mirroring Job's own self-descriptions back to him in the figure of the wicked. So for instance, in chapter 3 verse 25, Job had said, For the thing that I fear comes upon me, and what I dread befalls me. Eliphaz begins his portrayal of the wicked in verses 20 to 24 with a man who dreads and fears his doom. This man is paranoid, he knows that destruction is about to come upon him. Every day he anticipates the blow about to fall. He knows that he is at odds with cosmic justice, and by God's moral governance he will experience his comeuppance.

[10 : 01] He is fatalistic in his thoughts. He is convinced that if he is overtaken by darkness, he will by no means escape from it. Long before the reality comes upon him, he is terrorized by the anticipations of it. From this, Eliphaz moves to another portrayal in verses 25 to 27. Here is a man who sets himself up against God, who in his arrogance boldly defies the Almighty. Like a warrior, he charges at God with his shield before him. Yet for all his pride and boasting, he is grossly overweight and ill-suited for the fight. Job may talk a proud talk on his behalf, yet it is clear that he is utterly unprepared for the confrontation. In verses 28 to 31, the portray shifts to one of desolation and emptiness.

This wicked man is doomed to live in desolate places and wildernesses. He gains no real wealth and leaves no legacy. He is fated to futility, his work will be consumed, and his life will vanish like breath from his mouth. The fruitlessness of the wicked becomes even clearer in verses 32 to 34. This is a man cut off before his time. Well before the proper time for harvest, before he has actually been able to bring forth fruit, he is cut off, doomed to barrenness and destruction like all of the wicked.

Eliphaz began his speech by talking about Job bringing forth hot air from his belly, as if giving birth to his foolish words. In concluding, he returns to another theme of conception and birth.

The wicked man is one who conceives, as if within a womb, deceit. Job, Eliphaz is insinuating, is a man whose heart is not right, and all of his other problems are arising from that.

[11 : 44] A question to consider. Can you think of any parts of Job's statements to this point that Eliphaz might be alluding to in the second part of his speech?