

Job 22: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Job chapter 22. Then Eliphaz the Temanite answered and said, Can a man be profitable to God? Surely he who is wise is profitable to himself. Is it any pleasure to the Almighty if you are in the right, or is it gain to him if you make your ways blameless? Is it for your fear of him that he reproves you and enters into judgment with you? Is not your evil abundant? There is no end to your iniquities, for you have exacted pledges of your brothers for nothing, and stripped the naked of their clothing. You have given no water to the weary to drink, and you have withheld bread from the hungry. The man with power possessed the land, and the favoured man lived in it. You have sent widows away empty, and the arms of the fatherless were crushed. Therefore snares are all around you, and sudden terror overwhelms you, or darkness so that you cannot see, and a flood of water covers you. Is not God high in the heavens? See the highest stars, how lofty they are. But you say, What does God know? Can he judge through the deep darkness? Thick clouds veil him, so that he does not see, and he walks on the vault of heaven. Will you keep to the old way that wicked men have trod?

They were snatched away before their time. Their foundation was washed away. They said to God, Depart from us, and what can the Almighty do to us? Yet he filled their houses with good things, but the counsel of the wicked is far from me. The righteous see it, and are glad. The innocent one mocks at them, saying, Surely our adversaries are cut off, and what they left the fire has consumed. Agree with God and be at peace. Therefore good will come to you. Receive instruction from his mouth, and lay up his words in your heart. If you return to the Almighty, you will be built up. If you remove injustice far from your tents, if you lay gold in the dust, and gold of Ophir among the stones of the torrent bed, then the Almighty will be your gold, and your precious silver. For then you will delight yourself in the Almighty, and lift up your face to God. You will make your prayer to him, and he will hear you, and you will pay your vows. Decide on the matter, and it will be established for you, and light will shine on your ways. For when they are humbled, you say, It is because of pride. But he saves the lowly. He delivers even the one who is not innocent, who will be delivered through the cleanness of your hands. Job chapter 22 is the start of the third and final cycle of dialogues. Once again, it is Eliphaz who opens it. Eliphaz had opened his first speech to Job in chapter 4 quite gently. His fundamental message had been that mortal man could not be pure in the sight of a holy God. In the face of God's transcendent holiness, all of man's faults would be seen, and man therefore had no standing to claim to be in the right before God. Eliphaz's third speech divides into three sections, verses 2 to 11, verses 12 to 20, and verses 21 to 30. This time, in contrast to his first speech, Eliphaz takes a very aggressive approach. He will accuse Job of most serious sin. Verses 2 to 11 present a list of charges, matters in which Eliphaz suggests that Job has sinned. Verses 12 to 20 present Job as having taken the way of the wicked, having aligned himself with the wicked. And the rest of the chapter presents a call to repent, which could be read in different ways. Perhaps Eliphaz thinks that Job might be receptive, or perhaps the call to repentance is designed to highlight Job's impenitence by contrast. The opening verse of Eliphaz's speech raises some questions for translation. John Hartley translates it as follows, Can a man benefit God, that a wise man should be in harmony with him? Hartley understands Eliphaz to be arguing by this, that the wise man has no purchase upon, or demand upon God, and in consequence, no basis upon which to claim reconciliation with him. Norman Harbel translates it as, Can a hero endanger El, or a sage endanger the ancient one? Understood this way, Eliphaz would be saying that Job can't force God's hand. God is the transcendent ruler of the world, his justice is beyond question, and there is no way that Job can arraign him. David Clines presents a third possible translation.

[4 : 1 8] Can a human be profitable to God? Can even a sage benefit him? This would be making a similar point, but from a different perspective. God can't be put in anyone's debt. God doesn't need

anyone.

He neither gains nor loses from the conduct of someone such as Job. The ESV is an example of yet another reading, of the second half of the verse, Surely he who is wise is profitable to himself. Again, the fundamental point of the verse is similar, but the second half of the verse would be designed to show the true purpose of wisdom. The person is not wise because God needs them to be wise, or because that wisdom brings any benefit to God himself. No, the person is wise for their own sake and benefit. Verses 3 and 4 develop the point of verse 2. God is impartial. He is also transcendent.

He does not have a vested interest in this situation. He is neither threatened by it, nor is he benefited by it. The implicit logic of Eliphaz's argument seems to be that since God does not have such an interest, he is not benefited by Job's actions, and he is not threatened by them, what has befallen Job clearly has not risen out of some private purpose on God's part, as if God, to get something out of one of his creatures, had to shake him down. Nor, of course, is God unjust, and so the only logical conclusion is that Job is suffering as a result of his sins. There is an irony in Eliphaz's argument here, of course, as the opening chapters of Job indicate that God does in fact have a vested interest in Job's righteousness. Eliphaz, who had started his first case against Job hesitantly, now breaks forth into the most scathing condemnation of Job of all. Job, he insists, is guilty of immense sin. In particular, Eliphaz accuses Job of a series of acts of injustice. Job, we must remember, was the greatest of the men of the east. He was a king or chief among his people, responsible for administering justice.

To Eliphaz's mind, there can only be one explanation for what has happened to Job. He must have been guilty of the most egregious oppression. These charges, of course, are nothing but falsehood. Job, in chapter 29, describes the way that he had been the one who had delivered people who were oppressed, and in chapter 31 he gives a list of different sins that he might have committed, sins for which he might have been deserving of such judgment, and denies that he is guilty of any one of them. Eliphaz had described the doom of the wicked in chapter 15 verses 20 to 21.

[6 : 42] Job, he argues, is such a wicked person, and as a result, this is why he experiences all these snares and terrors around him. This is why he's been engulfed and overwhelmed with his troubles.

He accuses Job, in the second part of his speech, of a sort of practical atheism. God is the most high guard. He's above all things. He's in the heavens, and he's ignorant of affairs on earth. They are not occurring within his sight. Bailed in the darkness, he cannot see, and he cannot judge. He's distant and detached. Presuming Job to hold this theology, Eliphaz accuses him of going with the path of the wicked, a well-worn evil path that has been there since the beginning. Such men thought themselves immune to God's justice, even as God was mercifully allowing them to prosper for a time. Yet such men, in their misplaced confidence, are snatched away before their time, as in a flash flood, they are swept away. When this happens, the righteous rejoice over them, seeing the Lord's justice in action.

The reference to the fire in verse 20 might again be intended to allude back to the fire of God that fell upon Job's servants and his sheep back in chapter 1. Eliphaz concludes his speech by presenting Job with the way of repentance and what will follow. If he agrees with God, submitting himself under the Lord's punishment, he might hope for some sort of restoration. Judgment received in such a manner would be instructive and for Job's bettering. To return to the Lord, he needs to eschew the injustice that he has been engaged in. He has clearly been gathering gold by wickedness and oppression, and so he needs to return the gold to its source, back to the dust and the bed of the river. Releasing his grip on this gold and turning to the Lord as his true wealth will be the way that he can be restored. Gold has obviously taken over Job's heart, and he must release his grip on it, if it is going to release its grip on him, and then he can finally be restored. Verses 26 to 29 are a portrait of the man who has been restored in fellowship with God. He delights in the Lord. He has fellowship with the

Lord in prayer. His path will be established, and he will agree with the Lord in his judgments. In his righteousness in this situation, Job will even be able to deliver others who are not righteous.

Through his intercession for them, they may be delivered too. Of course, the irony here is that at the end of the book, Job will have to intercede for Eliphaz and the other friends.

A question to consider. While the reader of Job knows that Eliphaz is wrong, it might be worth reflecting upon how he is wrong. In what ways does Eliphaz here express a false view of God?

[9 : 27] What is he missing?