

Job 23: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Job chapter 23. Then Job answered and said, Today also my complaint is bitter, my hand is heavy on account of my groaning. Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his seat.

I would lay my case before him, and fill my mouth with arguments. I would know what he would answer me, and understand what he would say to me. Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power? No, he would pay attention to me. There an upright man could argue with him, and I would be acquitted forever by my judge.

Behold, I go forward, but he is not there. And backward, but I do not perceive him. On the left hand, when he is working, I do not behold him. He turns to the right hand, but I do not see him. But he knows the way that I take. When he has tried me, I shall come out as gold.

My foot has held fast to his steps. I have kept his way, and have not turned aside. I have not departed from the commandment of his lips. I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my portion of food.

But he is unchangeable, and who can turn him back? What he desires, that he does. For he will complete what he appoints for me, and many such things are in his mind.

[1 : 1 6] Therefore, I am terrified at his presence. When I consider, I am in dread of him. God has made my heart faint. The Almighty has terrified me. Yet I am not silenced because of the darkness, nor because thick darkness covers my face.

Job chapter 23 is Job's first speech in the third and final cycle of speeches. However, even though he is speaking after Eliphaz the Temanite, he isn't responding to his friend at this point.

Eliphaz had been grossly unjust in his characterisations of Job. He had accused Job of great wrong and oppression. And given the feelings on both sides, there is little point in responding to him.

Exactly what is being referred to by today in verse 2 is not entirely clear. Perhaps Job's conversations with his friends are proceeding over a number of different days. Perhaps three days, one for each cycle.

John Hartley suggests rather that we should read this as even now. Job, perhaps referring in part back to the previous speech, is insisting that he is going to go on with his complaint.

[2 : 1 6] He has not been swayed from that course. Job's woes continue, and his complaint remains bitter. Job's complaint is the case that he wants to bring before God. The problem for Job, however, is that he does not know where God is to be found. If he cannot find where God is, how can he have an audience with him?

Job imagines what he would do if he did in fact find God and have an audience with him. He would lay his case out before the Lord. He would present all his different arguments. The Lord would then address Job and his situation in a way that he could understand and accept.

Job is confident that he would be acquitted in such a scenario. But he is also confident that the process itself, in which he would present his case and his arguments to the Lord, and the Lord would listen and respond, would itself bring some satisfaction and prove cathartic.

He raises the question in verse 6 whether God would just overwhelm him with his might. Yet, answering his own question, he believes that he would not. Rather, the Lord would be just and would listen to his case and then respond in a manner marked by his justice.

Yet, attractive as this imagined scenario is for Job, there is no way to realise it. He still cannot locate God. Verses 8-9 describe the problem with trying to localise God.

[3 : 28] God cannot be pinned down anywhere. God's ways are inscrutable and he himself is transcendent. He acts everywhere but he is contained nowhere. Arrestingly, in verse 10, Job speaks of his confidence that the Lord, once he has tried him, proven his quality, he will be shown to be gold.

In earlier speeches, Job had expressed his uncertainty that he would be able to take any more. He felt as if he were being pushed to his limit and beyond. But here there is a note of strength and perseverance that we have not really heard from Job to this point.

At least not in quite such a pronounced form. The trying in question is not the same thing as refining. The point is not that God is refining Job to make him a purer form of gold.

Rather, God is testing Job to manifest what quality he is. To this point, of all the explanations given by Job and the friends, this is the nearest to the actual truth.

God, or perhaps more properly Satan, who has been given permission by God, is testing Job to see whether his quality is really what God has suggested. Job believes that he will be proven through such testing.

[4 : 31] Because, as he says in verses 10 to 12, He has been faithful in his steps, and the Lord knows this. He has not departed from God's commandments. He is treasured and delighted in God's word.

And he has walked in his way. Norman Harbel observes of the language of way in these verses. The term way carries several connotations here, and is rich in associations.

The way for Job includes the way of God, to which Job has adhered unswervingly. That way is apparently the righteous way of life Job elaborates in his extended confession, in chapter 31, verses 4 following, where he maintains that his feet have not deviated from the way of integrity.

But the way with Job recalls Job's complaint that God prevents mortals from finding their way, that is, their direction or destiny in life. Way, however, is also associated with the quest motif.

Mortals do not know the way to wisdom or God, but God knows the way of humans in all senses of that word. From this note of confidence, Job returns to speaking about the problem that he will face in presenting this case.

[5 : 36] The beginning of verse 13 declares that God is one, which has been read in a number of different ways. Maybe God is in one mind, meaning that he is unchangeable and fixed in his opinion.

Maybe it means that he is unique, or another such statement about his deity. Job might be referring to the way that the incomparable God, above all earthly and created things, cannot be swayed by a mere mortal man's opinion.

If God has set his mind on a matter, in this case bringing suffering and punishment upon Job, then how could a mere mortal expect to sway him? Surely God's purpose would just be followed through to its conclusion.

[6 : 33]

He wants to come face to face to deal with God, but yet he knows that God's presence is terrifying and could overwhelm him. He has earlier spoken of feeling terrorised by God, and has always struggled with the lurking fear that should he come into the presence of God, God would just overwhelm him with his majesty and greatness.

A question to consider, what are some of the distinctive hallmarks of faith that we can see in Job's response at this point?