

January 28, 2007
If Only It Were SO!

Psalm 44:13-19 / Hebrews 12:4-13 / Job 22:1-30

TODAY we begin the THIRD and LAST cycle of interactions between Job and his friends — a cycle that follows the same pattern each time — Eliphaz speaks first, and Job replies / Bildad speaks second and Job responds to him / and then Zophar speaks last, and Job responds to him.

(Probably an indication that Eliphaz was the oldest / Bildad was in between / and Zophar was the youngest. Because in those days seniority dictated speaking order – youth always gave older people a chance to speak before they did. (How times have changed — huh?!))

Now, what we find today, as we begin this THIRD and LAST round of interactions is that the dialogue, though similar, brings in a new element. As Francis Anderson points out, “There is a considerable amount of repetition... Nevertheless, a certain movement can be detected.”

And it’s NOT because Eliphaz has changed his beliefs in the least! He hasn’t!

In response to Job’s assertion that wicked people often DO get away with their wicked deeds and DO live to old age, often dying in peace (21:8-13) Eliphaz still stubbornly clings to the belief (unsustainable as it is in light of all the evidence Job cited last week) that God would NEVER allow such a thing. Because Eliphaz doesn’t have any concept at all of a future “Day of Judgment” when God will right all the wrongs committed in this life, and judge all sin and evil, he must, therefore, protect the sense that “God is JUST” by ignoring all the evidence to the contrary, and stubbornly clinging to his belief that God always judges the wicked IN THIS LIFETIME.

If God DIDN’T do that (if he let the wicked go unpunished in this life, and let the righteous suffer in this life as Job is asserting) that would, by his way of thinking, make God unjust. And not only that, it would also (he believes) take away people’s impetus to shun evil and their impetus to strive to be good (or pious) / and would thereby undermine the basis of all religion (as Eliphaz explicitly states in 15:4).

That’s why we find him (once again) declaring that God WILL, in this lifetime, punish evildoers by causing BAD things to happen to them, and reward all righteous people by causing GOOD things to happen to them — thereby reinforcing the basis of all religion — which for him, means motivating wicked people to cease from their wickedness, and encouraging good people to continue in their striving to be good.

And, of course, with those basic presuppositions under girding everything he believes, he goes on to assert that if BAD things DO HAPPEN to people we THOUGHT were GOOD, it's merely God's way of revealing to all that THEY WEREN'T REALLY THAT GOOD to begin with.

The bad things happening to them are simply God's way of exposing the fact that they were sinning — albeit secretly. According to his theological perspective, that's how it has to be! His belief system doesn't allow for any other interpretation of the circumstances.

That's why he can go on to say to Job in verses 4-5:

“Is it for your piety that God rebukes you and brings charges against you?”
(Or in other words, “Are you suggesting, Job, that God is punishing you FOR being good?! How ludicrous!) Is not your wickedness great? Are not your sins endless?”

That's the “same old same old.” That's what we've heard all along. It's what follows in verses 6-11 that's NEW. Because up until this point Eliphaz has merely pointed out in vague and general ways — what wicked people do and how God judges them for it — hoping that Job might “connect the dots” and see himself as guilty of some of the sins he lists as sins that wicked people, in general, commit.

But such an INDIRECT attempt to convict Job's conscience has NOT worked! So, for the very first time in the book Eliphaz no longer says “You must have done something wrong,” nor does he say “This is what God judges the wicked for, and hopefully you'll see yourself as guilty of some of these things.”

NO! He gets tired of using the subtle and less direct way of trying to convict Job of sin, and starts listing off specific sins he is absolutely sure Job MUST be guilty of! In fact, because Job's sufferings are SO INTENSE, Eliphaz reasons that Job must have committed some REALLY BAD SINS — sins of the worst kind. He even says that in verse 5 — “Is not your wickedness GREAT? Or in other words, “You didn't just commit little sins, Job, you committed the worst kind of sins!” Which is exactly what he goes on to list.

And he feels justified in doing so, because according to his system of belief, “minor suffering would mean Job was guilty of minor sins, but severe suffering has to mean Job was guilty of the worst kind of sins imaginable” — and so he begins his onslaught of accusations:

“You demanded security from your brothers for no reason; you stripped men of their clothing, leaving them naked. You gave no water to the weary, and you withheld food from the hungry, though you were a powerful man, owning land — an honored man living on it. You sent widows away empty-handed, and broke the strength of the fatherless. That is why snares are all around you, why sudden peril terrifies you; why it’s so dark you cannot see, and why a flood of water covers you.”

Those would have been considered the worst of sins: Causing division in families / taking from the poor what little they had even though he had so much / refusing to help the weary / not feeding the hungry / sending widows away empty-handed / and being cruel to the fatherless or orphans.

Eliphaz accuses Job of having done them all, for nothing but committing the most vile of sins could possibly explain the severity of his suffering.

That’s the way it works when one holds to a “Theology of Merit and Demerit.” Do good things and God makes good things happen to you in return / Do bad things and God makes bad things happen to you in return both on a graduated scale. Minor effort produces minor rewards / more effort produces more rewards / and immense effort produces immense rewards! The more pious things you do, or the more faith you have, or the more holy you become – the more blessings come your way!

But, of course, in that system the exact opposite holds as well: little sins receive minor punishment / bigger sins receive larger punishments / and the most horrible of sins receive the most severe of punishments! Meaning you essentially EARN every single thing you get in life on the basis of your performance, be it rewards, or punishments.

That’s why Eliphaz is so confident when he accuses Job of the sins he THINKS Job has committed. Job’s suffering is unspeakably severe, and thus, by his way of thinking, Job has to have committed the worst type of sins, which in the OT were: Causing alienation in families, abusing the poor and needy, and ignoring or taking advantage of the widow and the orphan.

In fact, the OT prophets warned people about such sins so frequently that one of my seminary professors could say, “There’s one sure way to provoke the anger and wrath of God — abuse the poor, or mess with the widow and the orphan.”

So, what can we learn from all this? **FIRST**, we learn that IF Eliphaz's system of belief was right, his accusations probably WOULD have been true. If God did work on a tit for tat, predictable system of gradually increasing blessing for good deeds done, and gradually increasing punishment for bad deeds done, the intensity of Job's sufferings would have suggested that he had done something have terribly, terribly wrong.

But he hadn't. That's part of "The Gospel according to Job." Job, like Jesus, shows us that a blameless and righteous man can be subjected to horrible, horrible suffering, and have done nothing in particular wrong. In fact, in Jesus it shows us that a righteous man who has done absolutely nothing wrong can suffer horrible things precisely because they have done everything right!

Isn't that what the deaths of Stephen, and Peter, and Paul, and all the other apostles also tell us? That because we live in a fallen world we will be hated, and persecuted, and sometimes tortured and killed — we may suffer immensely — precisely because we shun evil and do what God wants us to do. Doesn't Paul say that, "He who lives a righteous life in Christ Jesus WILL suffer persecution?" Didn't Jesus say that because we love Him the world would hate us?

Just this week I was reading a book entitled "The Ten Most Evil Women in History," and one of the entries was about "Bloody Mary of Madagascar"— the island of the south east coast of Africa. It tells how she was an immoral, power-hungry, vengeful, promiscuous woman, who in 1857 forced all Christian missionaries to leave the island, declaring the Bible to be an evil book, and making it punishable by death to own one (or even a hymnal!) To meet for worship, claim Christ as Lord, evangelize, or convert to Christianity.

And the book goes on to list the unspeakable tortures and cruel ways she had those Christians killed — thousands of them — boiled alive, burned alive, cast down jagged cliffs, and forced to drink poison.

For what? For nothing other than being obedient, God-loving, committed, Christ trusting, righteous disciples of Jesus! (All of which made the church grow by leaps and bounds!) Being of the darkness, she hated anything that had to do with the light. The same is true of Satan — and yet God sometimes chooses to allow him to vent his wrath upon us — a wrath that actually purifies us, restores to us correct priorities, teaches us endurance, and what it means to trust and be obedient followers of Jesus.

Yet concepts like that don't even enter Eliphaz's brain! To him it is inconceivable that God would allow, or ordain, the suffering of innocent people. That they would suffer NOT because they had done anything wrong, but precisely because they were doing everything right! That they would suffer intensely though godly.

What Eliphaz states as being so ridiculous that no one would ever believe it, actually turns out to be true. "It was for their piety that they were being rebuked or suffering." Which means Eliphaz has judged Job falsely and unwisely, not on the basis of what he has personally seen him do, but on the basis of false assumptions derived from his just plain bad theology.

Then **SECONDLY**, this text does give us insights into why the righteous suffer. Eliphaz asks in verse 3: "What pleasure would it give the Almighty if you were righteous?" And he apparently assumes the answer is "none." God is so great that He needs no one and nothing (which is true)! But it does not therefore follow that whether we are righteous or not makes no difference to Him! It does not therefore follow that our godliness brings Him little or no pleasure at all.

He begins with the right premise and ends with the wrong conclusion! Because God IS indeed pleased when we seek to live a righteous or godly life. It doesn't earn us salvific merits with God. (There is no such thing as meritorious behavior that earns us salvific credits with God!) Though righteousness and godliness do please Him.

In fact, what Eliphaz seems totally oblivious to is that it pleases God so much that He will use any means it takes to train us in it — including suffering! That's one of the things Eliphaz just doesn't seem to get! Because his mind is locked into his merit / demerit construct, he can't see that suffering, hardships, struggles, and trials are often the very means of grace by which God trains us in righteousness.

He allows those things to come into our lives for the very purpose of training us in godliness, because that's not only His stated goal for our lives (Eph. 1:4), but also because the fruit of godliness in our lives pleases Him or brings Him pleasure. NOT pleasure in seeing us suffer, but pleasure in seeing us grow in godliness (Rom 14:18 / I Tim. 2:1-3 / I Jn. 3:22). "Unless we share in His sufferings," says the Apostle Paul in Romans 8:17, "we will not share in His glory," — His "glory" being His "likeness" or the "radiance of His holiness."

Likewise, Hebrews 2:10 tells us, "The author of our salvation was made perfect through suffering", or as he puts it in Chap. 5:18, "Christ learned obedience by the things that he suffered."

And if Christ was perfected and learned obedience through the things He suffered, who are we to think we can learn it apart from suffering?

You see, obedience never really becomes an issue until what we want and what comes our way / or what we want and what God wants for us come to be at odds with each other. It isn't until my will says "I want to do this," and God says, "No, I want you to do that," that I must learn to exercise obedience. Until God's will for us comes to be at odds with our own will for us (and we must struggle intensely to obey like Jesus in the Garden) — we never really learn obedience — we merely continue doing what we want!

So trials and struggle and hardships and suffering (rightly understood) are God's way of training us in obedience, causing us to share in Christ's glory, or forming us into the likeness of Jesus. They are NOT punishments for sin, but expressions of His very purposeful grace training us in righteousness, and instructing us in the art of godly obedience.

When I played FOOTBALL, the coach's job was to train me, toughen me up, build up my endurance, and get me in such good shape that I wouldn't fade from exhaustion as the game went on. And although I would have preferred it be otherwise, I KNEW that the only way to accomplish that necessary objective was countless sprints, and laps, drills, and exercises, and lunges, and pushing that dumb sled around. I can still hear His favorite words: "No pain, no gain." And as a line coach he was very good at inflicting pain!

Not because he was sadistic, or hated us, or wanted to punish us, or be mean, but because he knew what he needed to do to prepare us to be the best athlete's we could be. Any coach that doesn't push his players till they hurt isn't doing his job! And we knew it, which is why we respected him even though he made us suffer.

That's basically what the Scriptures say about God. His goal is to make us like Christ. To do so He must TRAIN us in righteousness. And training us in righteousness (like training an athlete) often involves pain, learning to resist the temptation to quit when things get rough, building up endurance, learning obedience by encountering difficult situations and choices, and being pushed beyond what we ever thought we were capable of.

Such things are expressions of God's purposeful love which knows what we need, and must often turn a deaf ear to our complaints when it begins to hurt! (Just like my coach had to turn a deaf ear when we'd say, "Come on, coach! Not another ten sprints! Not another 5 laps!!")

You see, because Eliphaz holds to a theology of merit, he has no concept of suffering as an expression of divine love, or godly instruction, or training in righteousness. To him, suffering, trials and hardships are expressions of divine punishment, and health, wealth and prosperity are expressions of divine blessing. It's that simple.

That's why he refuses to admit that the wicked prosper, or that Job, if he were righteous, would suffer — his theology of merit and demerit won't permit it.

Then **THIRD**, the text teaches us how a theology of merit, or a theology of performance based grace (grace we earn by our efforts) leads to a judgmental attitude (on the one hand), and a "God has to bless us and give us what we ask for" irreverence (on the other). Wherever you find pointing fingers and judgmental attitudes, you will also find a "God owes me" type attitude. They're like inseparable twins! And both are the result of adopting or adhering to a theology which teaches that in some way one earns divine grace by their godly efforts, and loses that grace when they mess up.

In fact, that's how the passage is broken up:

- 1.) Verses 1-4 (as we've already seen) deals with why suffering comes upon a person.
- 2.) Verses 5-20 show Eliphaz unjustly, and without any verifiable evidence at all, judging and accusing Job of specific acts of wickedness.

And

- 3.) Verses 21-30 show Eliphaz promising Job that if he would only do the right things — like submitting to God, and accepting instruction from Him, and returning to Him and repenting of his sin — he would have peace with God once again, God would prosper him, his health would be restored, all his suffering would go away, God would become intimate with him once again, answer all his prayers, bless all his efforts, and save anyone he prayed for! Job could command God to do things (v. 29) and God would do them! On the basis of Job's godly merits, God would not only save Job, but save anyone Job asked Him (or commanded Him) to save—even if the person was not innocent (v30).
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THAT is why I titled my message — If only it were true!!! Wouldn't it be great to walk around with "God in your pocket," so to speak? Like a little "genie in a bottle" that you could pull out at any moment and as long as your store of merits was high enough, have Him do anything you ask! Even saving every person you pray for, or lifting out of depression every person you go to Him commanding: "Lift them up!"

How I wish it WERE true! How I WISH that I could save any person I wanted to merely by praying for them, or that every person I prayed for, without exception, would be converted! Wow! I'd be the greatest evangelist in the history of the world!

Don't we ALL wish that anything we decided on would be done? And not only done, but have the light of God's countenance shine down upon it (that is, have it flourish)! We'd be unstoppable! We could go around commanding God to do things and commanding God to save people and have Him do whatever we ask! I mean, how could anyone not want that? It so appeals to our flesh!

And you know what I just gave you? I just gave you some of the things that make the Health and Wealth Gospel, or the Name it Claim it Faith Movement so popular.

I was reminded of that this past week when I got a letter in the mail from a church in Tulsa, Oklahoma that had a "Faith Handkerchief" inside. (Anyone else receive one?) It said the little paper handkerchief had been prayed over, and that if I would write my name on it / place it in my Bible at Acts 19:11-12 / put it under my side of the bed as I slept / and in the morning mail it back to their church, they would pray for my request and I would receive my miracle — like the man from Florida who received \$6000 / or the person from New York who received \$5000 / or the man from Illinois who the very next day received a "BIG (unspecified) financial blessing.

In fact, it even had a place where I could fill in amount of money I wanted God to bless me with! And, of course, a place where I could specify how much "seed money" I was going to donate to their ministry — the idea being that I was more likely to receive my miracle if I donated to their ministry.

(Sort of like the Readers Digest \$1,000,000 Give-Away, where it's not said, but you're made to FEEL that your more likely to win the prize if you buy a book, or magazine subscription — which is exactly what they hope you'll feel!)

That's the appeal of merit-based theological systems. They convey the perception that if you just follow the right formula, have enough faith, and carry out the five easy steps they specify, you WILL get your miracle! God will do it — guaranteed! And we like that. It makes life so predictable! I merit my miracle by doing all the right things.

That's why Eliphaz's belief system is so popular and widely embraced — because it's all so neat and tidy and predictable and guaranteed! Unlike Job's belief system which is much less popular — because it's not so tidy, or predictable, or black and white and it doesn't come with any absolute guarantees.

In fact, rather than demanding God to do things, it demands that we trust Him. And answer to prayer doesn't rest in our ability to generate faith, but in the wise and all-knowing will of a loving heavenly Father who gives us only what is good for us — including sometimes firm and painful discipline — and withholds from us those things he deems would be bad for us. Anything He knows would thwart His purpose of producing in us the fruit of righteousness and peace, and
godly character.

Which means that suffering (as the Author of Hebrews points out) is really an expression of love and parental instruction and training in righteousness aimed at producing endurance, patience, obedience and peace, and is NOT necessarily a punishment for unrighteousness.

Which brings us to our LAST point. That a theology of merit (where one earns God's blessings by their good performance, and gets judged for bad performance) can't help but breed a judgmental attitude in those who adhere to it — as is the case with Eliphaz, who spends the better portion of this chapter condemning Job for things he never did / making slanderous and judgmental accusations regarding things he cannot prove / and thinking he is perfectly justified in doing so by his system of religious merits and demerits.

By his way of thinking, those who prosper, are in good health, and grow in wealth, are reaping the blessings of the "good seed" they planted, and those who suffer, hurt, are sick, struggle financially or are reduced to poverty are reaping the punishment for their mess ups, or the "bad seed" they've planted.

That's what logic would point to — at least under the system of merit and demerit. In fact, if Eliphaz had been a witness to the intensity of Jesus sufferings during His trial and on the cross, he probably would have accused *Jesus* of great wickedness too — though Jesus had done absolutely nothing wrong! Which merely goes to show that BAD THEOLOGY leads to WRONG CONCLUSIONS, and WRONG CONCLUSIONS spawn BAD SPIRITUAL FRUIT (judgmentalness being little more than a sign of gracelessness, and a twisted perception of God, which is why it is forbidden by Scripture).

And on that note let me conclude with this admonition:

If YOU wrestle with judgmental thoughts, it's probably an indication that you need to pause and ask yourself if YOU also, in some way, believe that it is your performance that keeps you in grace, or excludes you from grace. Because that's the soil in which judgmental attitudes take root. And if you DO find traces of judgmentalness there, I urge you, by the grace of God, to repent for not believing the Gospel -- a gospel which liberates us from judgmentalness by assuring us we cannot merit God's grace by our performance, nor lose it when we mess up.