



Job - Chapter Twenty Three

II Job 3:1-42:6 - Dialogue: Job, His Suffering, and His Standing before God (continues)

II.b Job 4:1-25:6 - The Friends and Job: Can Job be Right Before God? (continues)

II.b.iii Job 22:1-25:6 - The Third Cycle (continues)

Summary of Chapter Twenty Three

Job apologises for his complaining; he wishes to plead his cause in the presence of his maker from whom he knows he should receive justice. However, he regrets that he cannot find God in all his trials (vv.1-9). Still, he gives himself and his cause up to God with the conviction of his own innocence and God's justice and goodness (vv.10-14). Job is, nevertheless, afraid when he considers the majesty of his maker (vv.15-17).

II.b.iii.2 Job 23:1-24:25 - Job: God is Hidden

Job is tired of arguing his case before his friends, which is revealed in part by the way he largely ignores the content of Eliphaz's most recent response. Instead, he expresses his longing to be able to come before God directly because Job trusts that his ways are truly known and would be vindicated by God (vv.1-17). In the second part of the speech in Chapter 24, Job laments that judgement does not appear to come more evidently on those who oppress the needy for their own gain.

II.b.iii.2.a Job 23:1-17 - Job Replies: My Complaint Is Bitter

Refer to the chapter summary above.

- 1 Then Job answered:
- 2 'Today also my complaint is bitter;

his hand is heavy despite my groaning.

Job 23:1-2

The opening phrase of Job's response is probably directed at his friends more than at God. When he begins with 'Today also' Job is implying that after all of the dialogue with his friends they have neither attended to him well nor persuaded him of his guilt. The wisdom and counsel of Eliphaz and others was of no relief to him and just made his mental and spiritual agony worse.

My hand is heavy despite my groaning. Although it is not typically stated in this manner, the images of the hand being heavy or strengthened, for example: <<*Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees*>> (Isaiah 35:3), or 'falling', as in: <<*We have heard news of them, our hands fall helpless; anguish has taken hold of us, pain as of a woman in labour*>> (Jeremiah 6:24), are used in the OT to refer respectively to a person being either encouraged or discouraged.

- ³ O that I knew where I might find him,
that I might come even to his dwelling!
- ⁴ I would lay my case before him,
and fill my mouth with arguments.
- ⁵ I would learn what he would answer me,
and understand what he would say to me.
- ⁶ Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power?
No; but he would give heed to me.
- ⁷ There an upright person could reason with him,
and I should be acquitted for ever by my judge.

Job 23:3-7

O that I knew where I might find him. Job felt separated from God. Surely this was not the first crisis in his life, although of course it was far beyond any previous suffering he had experienced. He had found comfort and solace in God in prior times but in this catastrophe he felt he could not find God. In a way almost infinitely less, yet nevertheless real, Job experienced what Jesus experienced on the Cross: a man who had previously been in the fellowship and favour of God now felt utterly forsaken: <<*At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you*

forsaken me?’>> (Mark 15:34). This was the greatest source of torment in Job’s life.

This not only reveals Job’s sense of the loss of the presence of God but also of his longing to have it back. Charles Spurgeon comments, “Good men are washed towards God even by the rough waves of their grief; and when their sorrows are deepest, their highest desire is not to escape from them, but to get at their God.” And again, “In Job’s uttermost extremity he cried after the Lord. The longing desire of an afflicted child of God is once more to see his Father’s face. His first prayer is not, ‘Oh that I might be healed of the disease which now festers in every part of my body!’ nor even, ‘Oh that I might see my children restored from the jaws of the grave, and my property once more brought from the hand of the spoiler!’ but the first and uppermost cry is, ‘Oh that I knew where I might find HIM – who is my God! that I might come even to his seat!’”

I would lay my case before him. Job did not only want the sense of the presence of God for the sake of spiritual comfort; he also wanted it so he might be vindicated in the court of God, especially in the face of the accusations of his friends. Here Job’s courageous honesty is seen at its best. His consuming desire is to come face to face with God, not by a contrived penance, as Eliphaz recommends, but in fair trial.

I would learn what he would answer me, and I should be acquitted for ever by my judge. The last time Job used this kind of legal language, he was convinced that God would both ignore and condemn him; refer to Job 9:3, 9:16 and 9:19). Here, his convictions are just the opposite: if Job were granted an audience, God would give heed or pay attention and Job would be acquitted.

Job’s conscience assured him that he would find mercy and favour at the throne of God. His friends insisted that God was against Job in his sufferings but Job stubbornly clung to his innocence. Again, Spurgeon comments, “He has confidence in the Lord that, if he could have an audience with him, God would not use his power against him; but, on the contrary, would strengthen him in order that he might state his case.” Jesus teaches a similar principle to Christians: *<<When they bring you before the synagogues, the rulers, and the authorities, do not worry about how you are to defend yourselves or what you are to say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say’>> (Luke 12:11-12).*

⁸ ‘If I go forward, he is not there;

or backward, I cannot perceive him;

⁹ on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him;

I turn to the right, but I cannot see him.

Job 23:8-9

I go forward, backward, on the left, I turn to the right. Job insisted that he had sought God in the midst of his crisis. He looked in every direction he could. These two verses paint in vivid colours the distress and anxiety of a soul in search of the favour of God. No means are left untried, no place unexplored, in order to find the object of his research. This is a true description of the conduct of a genuine penitent. Once again Spurgeon notes, "This is one of the marks of a true child of God, - that, even when God smites him, he still longs for his presence."

He is not there; I cannot perceive him. No matter how sincerely and how diligently Job looked, he could not find God. God remained hidden through a barrier that was impossible to pierce: <<*Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Saviour*>> (Isaiah 45:15).

- 10 But he knows the way that I take;
when he has tested me, I shall come out like gold.
- 11 My foot has held fast to his steps;
I have kept his way and have not turned aside.
- 12 I have not departed from the commandment of his lips;
I have treasured in my bosom the words of his mouth.

Job 23:10-12

But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I shall come out like gold. Here is another bright flash of faith upon a generally black background. Job admitted that he could not get through to God, yet he clung to the confidence that God was still in control of this crisis: <<*I keep your precepts and decrees, for all my ways are before you*>> (Psalm 119:168). With wonderful faith, Job seemed at this fleeting instant to understand what he could and should in his present crisis. He understood that:

- God still observed Job carefully and had not forgotten him (he knows the way that I take).
- God had a purpose in the crisis and the purpose was not to punish Job (when he has tested me).
- God would one day bring the trial to an end (I shall come out).
- God would bring something good would from it all (I shall come out like gold).
- God still valued Job; only precious metal is put through the fire (like gold).

In his wish to present a case before God, Job refers to the manner of his life in vocabulary typical of the wisdom literature. He trusts that God knows the way that he has walked: Job has persevered in God's steps, he has not turned aside from his way and he has valued God's commandment and the words of his mouth more than provision for his own physical wellbeing.

Charles Spurgeon comments, "It looks very hard to believe that a child of God should be tried by the loss of his Father's presence, and yet should come forth uninjured by the trial. Yet no gold is ever injured in the fire. Stoke the furnace as much as you may, let the blast be as strong as you will, thrust the ingot into the very centre of the white heat, let it lie in the very heart of the flame; pile on more fuel, let another blast torment the coals till they become most vehement with heat, yet the gold is losing nothing, it may even be gaining." And again, "I shall ask four questions of every man within reach of my voice. God knoweth the way that you take. I will ask you first: Do you know your own way? Secondly: Is it a comfort to you that God knows your way? Thirdly: Are you tried in the way? And, if so, fourthly: Have you confidence in God as to the result of that trial? Can you say with Job, 'When he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold'?"

My foot has held fast to his steps. This was a dramatic defence of his integrity before his accusing friends. Job declared that he still followed God, i.e. I have kept his way, and loved his word, that is, I have treasured in my bosom the words of his mouth.

Spurgeon on this verse, "God spoke to Job. Did God ever speak to you? I do not suppose Job had a single page of inspired writing. Probably he had not even seen the first books of Moses; he may have done so, but probably he had not. God spoke to him. Did he ever speak to you? No man will ever serve God aright unless God has spoken to him." And again, "Then note, that what God had spoken to him he treasured up. He says in the Hebrew that he had hid God's word more than ever he had hidden his necessary food. They had to hide grain away in those days to guard it from wandering Arabs. Job had been more careful to store up God's word than to store up his wheat and his barley; more anxious to preserve the memory of what God had spoken than to garner his harvests. Do you treasure up what God has spoken?"

13 But he stands alone and who can dissuade him?

What he desires, that he does.

14 For he will complete what he appoints for me;
and many such things are in his mind.

15 Therefore I am terrified at his presence;

when I consider, I am in dread of him.

16 God has made my heart faint;

the Almighty has terrified me;

17 If only I could vanish in darkness,

and thick darkness would cover my face!

Job 23:13-17

But he stands alone and who can dissuade him? Job here argued back with himself against his previous great declaration of faith. He understood that although he did deeply and sincerely trust in God, at the same time he could not make God do anything.

For he will complete what he appoints for me; and many such things are in his mind. Job had to admit that God would do as he pleased in Job's life and would not be held hostage to Job's demands. He understood that the reasons and wisdom of God's work are ultimately with him and not known to Job or others such as Job's friends. Job here seemed to come closer and closer to the place God wanted him to be in his crisis. He comes closer and closer to realising that God can be trusted, that God does in fact love and care for him; but at the same time he is sovereign and at least some of his ways are beyond human knowledge and understanding.

Although he has carefully considered his way (vv.10-12), Job believes it is ultimately God who will bring about his purposes through what he appoints; for similar statements, refer to Proverbs 16:1, 16:9 and 20:24, and Jeremiah 10:23. Consequently, Job confesses that he is terrified at the thought of God's presence. Still, even in the darkness of not being able to understand his path or God's purposes fully, he is compelled to continue his lament: If only I could vanish in darkness.

Knowing what he could not know about God made Job appreciate the distance between himself and God. It made him feel a good and righteous awe of God, even though it felt like deep darkness because it was little comfort to him in his crisis. Job's strongest assertions of faith seem always to be coupled with equally strong assertions of fear and pain. In this chapter his confidence in his own righteousness is more unassailable than ever, yet at the same time 'thick darkness covers' his face and he is filled with dread. Somehow Job's faith is elastic enough to embrace simultaneously both terror and confidence.