"Human Beings Are Born to Trouble"

Shaking the Foundations of Religious Convictions

Chapter 4 launches three cycles of dialogues between the friends—Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar—and Job (Job 4–14, 15–21, 22–27). As long as Job was pious and patient, the friends were content to "console" and "comfort" him with their silent, sympathetic presence (2:11-13). But when Job moves from blessing to cursing God (see Session 2 on Job 3:1-10, 11, 12, 20), he shakes the foundations of their religious convictions. They move quickly to shore them up, lest everything collapse around them. Like a virus loosed in the world, Job's poison must be eradicated, at the very least quarantined, lest he infect their health and well-being. In their eyes, Job has become, in effect, a disease.

How does the suffering of others threaten our own well-being and our faith in God? How do we risk "infection" by dealing with these questions about God and suffering? How is this question of theodicy (the justice of God) greater than the suffering itself?

As the lead spokesman for the friends, Eliphaz takes the point in spelling out inviolable truths about God that will correct Job's misunderstanding, if he will only listen. In this first cycle of dialogues, the truth to which Job must submit is the doctrine of divine retribution: God unfailingly rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked.

Eliphaz advances this argument with a speech comprising three parts. First, like a skillful pastoral counselor, he gently poses a series of rhetorical questions (4:2-6) that invite Job's consent: "If one ventures a

Reflections

In his Pulitzer Prize–winning play *A Delicate Balance*, Edward Albee describes how suffering makes an unexpected intrusion into the blissful lives of Agnes and her husband, Tobias. Their lifelong friends, Edna and Harry, have sought refuge in Agnes and Tobias's home. One morning, after Tobias had stayed up all night pondering how to help these friends, Agnes offers her own assessment of the situation (in Act Three). This play might offer an interesting part of this study of Job.

word with you, will you be offended?" (v. 2); "Is not your fear of God your confidence, and the integrity of your ways your hope?" (v. 6). The response Eliphaz expects from Job to the first question is "No, of course not; a word from a sympathetic friend is always welcome"; to the second, "Yes, of course, because I do fear God, I am confident that my integrity gives me reason to hope that God will put all things right."

Born to Trouble

Second, Eliphaz counsels Job to shift his focus from the troubling specifics of his personal suffering to the generalized principles that undergird God's judgment of the righteous and the wicked (4:7–5:7). The following aspects of his argument invite careful reflection.

- Eliphaz asks, "Think now, who that was innocent ever perished?" (4:7) and then presumes the only answer he believes Job can truthfully offer. Those who are innocent may suffer, but they will not prematurely die. Why? Because God guarantees that those who sow "iniquity" will reap "trouble." The truth—or conceit—behind such an unequivocal assertion, is twofold: 1) It is sufficient for faith to trust that half of God's promised justice—the punishment of the wicked—is reliable. Even if the second half of this truth is wanting—the vindication of those who are righteous, like Job—the innocent are implicitly vindicated, no matter what the collateral cost of their affliction may be; and 2) long views of history, Eliphaz claims, always trump short-term realities. The question, "Who that was innocent ever perished?" (4:7) glosses Israel's recorded witness to those who did in fact either perish in innocence (e.g., 2 Kgs 21:16; 24:4; cf. Ps 106:38; Isa 59:7; Jer 22:17) or feared they would, if God did not intervene to rescue them (Pss 44:23-26; 59:1-5; 69:1-4).
- Eliphaz claims to have special insight into Job's predicament not only because of his personal experience (4:8: "As I have seen") but also because of what God has specially revealed to him (4:12-16). Like Moses, he has seen the "form" of God (4:16*a*; cf. Num 12:8); like Elijah, he has heard a voice speaking out of silence (4:16*b*; cf. 1 Kgs 19:12).

Eliphaz relays the substance of what God has revealed to him in a question, which may be paraphrased as follows: "Who are you [Job], in relation to me [God]? When you measure your righteousness against mine, can you stand before me and raise questions about who suffers and why?" (4:17). Once again the question is purely rhetorical. From Eliphaz's perspective, there can be only one legitimate answer. If Job is honest, then he must say, "No, because I am a flawed human being, a mere mortal, I cannot possibly challenge God's moral governance of the world."

- Based on this presumed answer from Job, Eliphaz proceeds to teach him a still deeper truth about human nature. Whereas he had previously argued from personal experience that humans who sow iniquity will reap trouble (4:8), he now argues that humans are "born to trouble" (5:7). Humans are birthed into a world where trouble and misery await them. Who or what is responsible for this? Eliphaz only hints at the answer, but because humans have no say in when or how they are birthed, he implies that God has ordained an inscrutable connection between humans and trouble. Irrespective of whatever sin or iniquity they may sow, humans are born (destined) to harvest trouble.

"Misfortune Is God's Rod of Discipline"

In the third and last section of his speech (5:8-27), Eliphaz encourages Job to adopt a different attitude toward God. While some may lament their vulnerability to trouble, the truly pious should welcome it. Indeed, they should be happy when suffering comes to them, because it is the surest sign that God loves them enough to chastise them (5:17). John Hartley's summation of Eliphaz's argument is apt: "Misfortune is God's rod of discipline." The proper response to suffering, therefore, is praise, for the God who "wounds" and "strikes" is the God who "binds up" and "heal[s]" (5:18).

A critical feature of each of the three cycles of dialogue between the friends and Job is the absence of the narrator, whose voice in chapters 1–2 offered interpretive guidance for the reader. We trust that Job is indeed

Teaching Tips

S. Mitchell writes in *The Book of Job*: Man [the human being] is the father [the parent] of sorrow, as surely as sparks fly upward. —S. Mitchell, *The Book of Job* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1992), 18.

Discuss how this poetic statement reflects one view of the experience of suffering.

Study Bible

For further discussion, see *NISB*, "Excursus: Job and His Three Friends," 707-8.

Sources

E. Albee, *A Delicate Balance* (New York: Plume, 1997); S. Mitchell, *The Book of Job* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1992), 18; J. Hartley, *The Book of Job*. New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 125.

"blameless and upright" (1:1), and that when afflicted by suffering he remained so by not charging God with any fault, because the narrator tells us this is true (1:22; 2:10). There is no narrator for Eliphaz's words, no one who steps into his speech with an evaluation that clarifies whether his counsel is to be trusted or not. When he claims that no innocent person has "ever perished," are we to accept this as true? When he claims, on the basis of a special divine revelation, that no human being is righteous enough to question God, should we agree? When he interprets God's creation of human beings to mean that all persons are "born to trouble," has he understood or misunderstood God's intentions? Absent a narrator's advice about how to decide these questions, we readers must listen and judge for ourselves. The journey toward discernment, as Eliphaz indicates in the last line of his speech, is necessarily shaped by a twin tension. On the one hand, we have the (presumably) authoritative counsel of those who have searched out these matters and claim that what they understand is "true" (5:27*a*). On the other hand, we must examine all that we have received and "hear" and "know" the truth for ourselves (5:27*b*).

Reflections

Retribution Theology

The belief that God prospers the righteous and punishes the wicked is affirmed throughout the Old Testament. The following representative texts may be consulted: Deut 30:15-18; Hos 4:1-3; Amos 4:1-3; Mic 3:9-12; and Ps 1. Despite the widespread affirmation of this belief, there are multiple voices of dissent, especially when the question about innocent suffering comes to the fore. Here too the challenge comes from every part of the Old Testament (e.g., Gen 18:25; Exod 32:11-12; Jer 12:1-4; Hab 1:1-4; Pss 44:17-22; 73:1-14), and nowhere more acutely than in the book of Job, which represents the most sustained critique of God's justice in the Hebrew Scriptures.

1. Considering these different witnesses in the Old Testament, how should we evaluate Eliphaz's counsel to Job? Why should Job agree with Eliphaz's truth? On what basis might he disagree with it?
2. Do our own experiences with suffering incline us to defend God's justice or to question it?
3. Are those in the modern world who find themselves sitting on the ash heap of suffering more likely to welcome friends who seek to "console and comfort" (Job 2:11) them with Eliphaz's words or to resist them?