

SUMMARY OF JOB 16 – 22

by Revd Dr Elaine Colechin

The desolating cry worked upon my mind. The wailing took possession of me.

I was intensely weary, footsore, hungry and thirsty.

Why was I wandering alone in this city of the dead? Why was I alive ...

These words of the Journalist in Jeff Wayne's musical adaptation of HG Well's "War of the Worlds" resonant with the position Job is in as we enter the second cycle of speeches between him and his so-called "friends".

In chapter 16, Job responds to Eliphaz's second reflection on his predicament with a deep expression of anguish and frustration. Job from the ashes of penitence where we find him seated with his friends, protests his innocence. If all that Job needed to do was be penitent, why had not God shown him mercy? Job wants an advocate, someone to speak up for him before God. This was not his friends. In this response, we begin to see how Job feels misunderstood and wrongly accused by his friends. In the first cycle and even more so in the second cycle of speeches, Job's "friends" go from trying to help Job to laying blame firmly at his door. Job, we will see, has gone from righteous to wicked in the eyes of his friends.

Job's response to Eliphaz, in chapter 17, develops further Job's plea to God for release from his suffering. Job believes that relief will only come through death. However, in the Hebrew scriptures, death is not a place of hope, it a place of complete nothingness. Therefore, as the reader, one might question why Job seeks death as vindication. Maybe, as in the words of the Journalist, better to be dead than living an existence that feels worse than death. With your friends turning against you and God remaining silent despite your cries, nothingness is preferable.

In response to this, Bildad pipes back up for chapter 18. The irony is that in this response Bildad states that the fate of the wicked is to be cast into Sheol—the place of the dead! Given Job is not dead, one might question Bildad logic. He makes the argument, though, that suffering is a place of darkness, and the wicked belong to that realm. Therefore, for Job to be suffering as he is in the story proves Job as wicked. Unlike Eliphaz, Bildad, at this point, sees no way out for Job so he does not appeal to Job to repent. Rather he bluntly tells him to accept his plight.

Chapter 19 is Job's comeback at Bildad. It is a powerful speech that emphasises the continued torture of his existence. The "Satan" of the opening chapters might have disappeared, but the tirade from his so-called friends feels like the devil still twisting the knife. Job expresses the feelings of isolation and alienation.

Interestingly, despite Job wanting the release of death, to a place where God is not, Job believes the time will come when he will see God, even if it is after his death! There is a remarkable glimpse of hope, in a situation that appears to be utterly hopeless. This, in what comes next in the story, might be short-lived. And we cannot ignore that Job is definitely now in the realms that he said he would never do—blame God!

Zophar, in chapter 20 and his second response to Job picks up very much on what Bildad said in chapter 18. The downfall of the wicked is inevitable. The wicked will suffer and eventually

be destroyed. From a place of knowledge of ancient things, Zophar, says with great certainty that Job troubles are, therefore, a result of his sin.

Job counters Zophar's argument, in chapter 21, by pointing out the prosperity and happiness of many wicked people. No one else was experiencing what he is! Job goes on to question the justice of God, as the wicked often seem to live without consequence while the righteous suffer. Job calls for a clearer understanding of divine justice.

This ends the second cycles of speeches and with the return of Eliphaz, in chapter 22, the third cycle begins.

Eliphaz returns to trying to find the exact cause of Job's downfall. In Eliphaz response, although he does not see Job as innocent, he does believe Job's situation is redeemable. Therefore, he offers the observation of specific sins, such as greed and oppression of the poor, that Job he believes should repent. This, Eliphaz asserts, will bring Job restoration from God and he will know blessing again.

The second cycles of speeches in these chapters highlight the intense and painful dialogue Job has with his friends. In those times when what you need are words of comfort and support, to be told you getting your due deserves is not what you want to hear. If Job had sinned, we might understand it. But given the prologue to the story of Job, one might wonder whether there are other forces at play. The other interesting observation in these chapters is Job's hope. He longs for death but there is hope somewhere in his spirit, to steal the words of the Pastor's Wife ...

There must be something worth living for
There must be something worth trying for
Even some things worth dying for!
And if one man can stand tall
There must be hope for us all
Somewhere, somewhere in the spirit of man.

*Lyrics from "Dead London" and "The Spirit of Man",
Jeff Wayne's Musical Version of the War of the Worlds, 1976*