

CHAPTER 23

This chapter begins Job's reply to Eliphaz. In this reply he takes no notice of his friends, either because he saw it was to no purpose or because he liked the good counsel Eliphaz gave him in the close of his discourse so well that he would make no answer to the peevish reflections he began with; but he appeals to God, begs to have his cause heard, and doubts not but to make it good, having the testimony of his own conscience concerning his integrity. Here seems to be a struggle between flesh and spirit, fear and faith, throughout this chapter.

I. He complains of his calamitous condition, and especially of God's withdrawals from him, so that he could not get his appeal heard (v. 2-5), nor discern the meaning of God's dealings with him (v. 8, 9), nor gain any hope of relief (v. 13, 14). This made deep impressions of trouble and terror upon him (v. 15-17). But,

II. In the midst of these complaints he comforts himself with the assurance of God's clemency (v. 6, 7), and his own integrity, which God himself was a witness to (v. 10-12). Thus was the light of his day like that spoken of, ^{<346>}Zechariah 14:6, 7, neither perfectly clear nor perfectly dark, but “at evening time it was light.”

~~<321>~~ JOB 23:1-7

THE REPLY OF JOB TO ELIPHAZ

Job is confident that he has wrong done him by his friends, and therefore, ill as he is, he will not give up the cause, nor let them have the last word. Here,

I. He justifies his own resentments of his trouble (v. 2): *Even to day, I own, my complaint is bitter; for the affliction, the cause of the complaint, is so. There are wormwood and gall in the affliction and misery; my soul has them still in remembrance* and is embittered by them, ^{<319>}Lamentations 3:19, 20. *Even to day is my complaint counted rebellion* (so some read it);

his friends construed the innocent expressions of his grief into reflections upon God and his providence, and called them *rebellion*. “But,” says he, “I do not complain more than there is cause; *for my stroke is heavier than my groaning*. Even today, after all you have said to convince and comfort me, still the pains of my body and the wounds of my spirit are such that I have reason enough for my complaints, if they were more bitter than they are.” We wrong God if our groaning be heavier than our stroke, like froward children, who, when they cry for nothing, have justly something given them to cry for; but we do not wrong ourselves though our stroke be heavier than our groaning, for little said is soon amended.

II. He appeals from the censures of his friends to the just judgment of God; and this he thought was an evidence for him that he was not a hypocrite, for then he durst not have made such an appeal as this. St Paul comforted himself in this, that *he that judged him was the Lord*, and therefore he valued not man's judgment (~~408~~ 1 Corinthians 4:3, 4), but he was willing to wait till the appointed day of decision came; whereas Job is impatient, and passionately wishes to have the judgment-day anticipated, and to have his cause tried quickly, as it were, by a special commission. The apostle found it necessary to press it much upon suffering Christians patiently to expect the Judge's coming, ~~508~~ James 5:7-9.

1. He is so sure of the equity of God's tribunal that he longs to appear before it (v. 3): *O that I knew where I might find him!* This may properly express the pious breathings of a soul convinced that it has by sin lost God and is undone for ever if it recover not its interest in his favour. “O that I knew how I might recover his favour! How I might come into his covenant and communion with him!” ~~306~~ Micah 6:6, 7. It is the cry of a poor deserted soul. “*Saw you him whom my soul loveth? O that I knew where I might find him!* O that he who has laid open the way to himself would direct me into it and lead me in it!” But Job here seems to complain too boldly that his friends wronged him and he knew not which way to apply himself to God to have justice done him, else he would go even to his seat, to demand it. A patient waiting for death and judgment is our wisdom and duty, and, if we duly consider things, that cannot be without a holy fear and trembling; but a passionate wishing for death or judgment, without any such fear and trembling, is our sin and folly, and ill becomes us. Do we know what death and judgment are, and are we so very ready for them, that we need not time to get readier? *Woe to those that thus, in a heat, desire the day of the Lord,* ~~305~~ Amos 5:18.

2. He is so sure of the goodness of his own cause that he longs to be opening it at God's bar (v. 4): "*I would order my cause before him, and set it in a true light. I would produce the evidences of my sincerity in a proper method, and would fill my mouth with arguments to prove it.*" We may apply this to the duty of prayer, in which we have *boldness to enter into the holiest* and to come even to the footstool of the throne of grace. We have not only liberty of access, but liberty of speech. We have leave,

(1.) To be particular in our requests, *to order our cause before God*, to speak the whole matter, to lay before him all our grievances, in what method we think most proper; we durst not be so free with earthly princes as a humble holy soul may be with God.

(2.) To be importunate in our requests. We are allowed, not only to pray, but to plead, not only to ask, but to argue; nay, *to fill our mouths with arguments*, not to move God (he is perfectly apprized of the merits of the cause without our showing), but to move ourselves, to excite our fervency and encourage our faith in prayer.

3. He is so sure of a sentence in favour of him that he even longed to hear it (v. 5): "*I would know the words which he would answer me,*" that is, "I would gladly hear what God will say to this matter in dispute between you and me, and will entirely acquiesce in his judgment." This becomes us, in all controversies; let the word of God determine them; let us know what he answers, and understand what he says. Job knew well enough what his friends would answer him; they would condemn him, and run him down. "But" (says he) "*I would fain know what God would answer me;* for I am sure his judgment is according to truth, which theirs is not. I cannot understand them; they talk so little to the purpose. But what he says I should understand and therefore be fully satisfied in."

III. He comforts himself with the hope that God would deal favourably with him in this matter, v. 6, 7. Note, It is of great use to us, in every thing wherein we have to do with God, to keep up good thoughts of him. He believes,

1. That God would not overpower him, that he would not deal with him either by absolute sovereignty or in strict justice, not with a high hand, nor with a strong hand: *Will he plead against me with his great power?* No. Job's friends pleaded against him with all the power they had; but will God do so? No; his power is all just and holy, whatever men's is. Against those

that are obstinate in their unbelief and impenitency God will *plead with his great power*; their destruction will come *from the glory of his power*. But with his own people, that love him and trust in him, he will deal in tender compassion.

2. That, on the contrary, he would empower him to plead his own cause before God: “*He would put strength in me*, to support me and bear me up, in maintaining my integrity.” Note, The same power that is engaged against proud sinners is engaged for humble saints, who prevail with God by strength derived from him, as Jacob did, ~~317~~ Hosea 12:3. See ~~185~~ Psalm 68:35.

3. That the issue would certainly be comfortable, v. 7. There, in the court of heaven, when the final sentence is to be given, *the righteous might dispute with him* and come off in his righteousness. Now, even the upright are often *chastened of the Lord*, and they cannot dispute against it; integrity itself is no fence either against calamity or calumny; but in that day *they shall not be condemned with the world*, though God may afflict by prerogative. *Then you shall discern between the righteous and the wicked* (~~318~~ Malachi 3:18), so vast will be the difference between them in their everlasting state; whereas now we can scarcely distinguish them, so little is the difference between them as to their outward condition, for all things come alike to all. Then, when the final doom is given, “*I shall be delivered for ever from my Judge*,” that is, “I shall be saved from the unjust censures of my friends and from that divine sentence which is now so much a terror to me.” Those that are delivered up to God as their owner and ruler shall be for ever delivered from him as their judge and avenger; and there is no flying from his justice but by flying to his mercy.

~~323~~ JOB 23:8-12

MYSTERY OF PROVIDENCE

Here,

I. Job complains that he cannot understand the meaning of God's providences concerning him, but is quite at a loss about them (v. 8, 9): *I go forward, but he is not there*, etc. Eliphaz had bid him acquaint himself with God. “So I would, with all my heart,” says Job, “If I knew how to get

acquainted with him.” He had himself a great desire to appear before God, and get a hearing of his case, but the Judge was not to be found. Look which way he would, he could see no sign of God's appearing for him to clear up his innocency. Job, no doubt, believed that God is every where present; but three things he seems to complain of here: —

- 1.** That he could not fix his thoughts, nor form any clear judgment of things in his own mind. His mind was so hurried and discomposed with his troubles that he was like a man in a fright, or at his wits' end, who runs this way and that way, but, being in confusion, brings nothing to a head. By reason of the disorder and tumult his spirit was in he could not fasten upon that which he knew to be in God, and which, if he could but have mixed faith with it and dwelt upon it in his thoughts, would have been a support to him. It is the common complaint of those who are sick or melancholy that, when they would think of that which is good, they can make nothing of it.
- 2.** That he could not find out the cause of his troubles, nor the sin which provoked God to contend with him. He took a view of his whole conversation, turned to every side of it, and could not perceive wherein he had sinned more than others, for which he should thus be punished more than others; nor could he discern what other end God should aim at in afflicting him thus.
- 3.** That he could not foresee what would be in the end hereof, whether God would deliver him at all, nor, if he did, when or which way. He saw not his signs, nor was there any to tell him how long; as the church complains, ~~1749~~ Psalm 74:9. He was quite at a loss to know what God designed to do with him; and, whatever conjecture he advanced, still something or other appeared against it.

II. He satisfies himself with this, that God himself was a witness to his integrity, and therefore did not doubt but the issue would be good.

- 1.** After Job had almost lost himself in the labyrinth of the divine counsels, how contentedly does he sit down, at length, with this thought: “Though I know not the way that he takes (for *his way is in the sea and his path in the great waters*, his thoughts and ways are infinitely above ours and it would be presumption in us to pretend to judge of them), yet *he knows the way that I take,*” v. 10. That is,

(1.) He is acquainted with it. His friends judged of that which they did not know, and therefore charged him with that which he was never guilty of; but God, who knew every step he had taken, would not do so, ^{<410>}Psalm 139:3. Note, It is a great comfort to those who mean honestly that God understands their meaning, though men do not, cannot, or will not.

(2.) He approves of it: “He knows that, however I may sometimes have *taken a false step*, yet I have still *taken a good way*, have *chosen the way of truth*, and therefore he knows it,” that is, he accepts it, and is well pleased with it, as he is said to *know the way of the righteous*, ^{<416>}Psalm 1:6. This comforted the prophet, ^{<213>}Jeremiah 12:3. *Thou hast tried my heart towards thee*. From this Job infers, *When he hath tried me I shall come forth as gold*. Those that *keep the way of the Lord* may comfort themselves, when they are in affliction, with these three things: —

[1.] That they are but tried. It is not intended for their hurt, but for their honour and benefit; *it is the trial of their faith*, ^{<610>}1 Peter 1:7.

[2.] That, when they are sufficiently tried, they shall come forth out of the furnace, and not be left to consume in it as dross or reprobate silver. The trial will have an end. *God will not contend for ever*.

[3.] That they shall come forth as gold, pure in itself and precious to the refiner. They shall come forth as gold approved and improved, found to be good and made to be better. Afflictions are to us as we are; those that go gold into the furnace will come out no worse.

2. Now that which encouraged Job to hope that his present troubles would thus end well was the testimony of his conscience for him, that he had lived a good life in the fear of God.

(1.) That God's way was the way he walked in (v. 11): “*My foot hath held his steps*,” that is, “held to them, adhered closely to them; the steps he takes. I have endeavoured to conform myself to his example.” Good people are followers of God. Or, “I have accommodated myself to his providence, and endeavoured to answer all the intentions of that, to follow Providence step by step.” Or, “His steps are the steps he has appointed me to take; the way of religion and serious godliness — that way I have kept, and have not declined from it, not only not turned back from it by a total apostasy, but not turned aside out of it by any wilful transgression.” His holding God's steps, and keeping his way, intimate that the tempter had

used all his arts by fraud and force to draw him aside; but, with care and resolution, he had by the grace of God hitherto persevered, and those that will do so must hold and keep, hold with resolution and keep with watchfulness.

(2.) That God's word was the rule he walked by, v. 12. He governed himself by *the commandment of God's lips*, and would not go back from that, but go forward according to it. Whatever difficulties we may meet with in the way of God's commandments, though they lead us through a wilderness, yet we must never think of going back, but must press on towards the mark. Job kept closely to the law of God in his conversation, for both his judgment and his affection led him to it: *I have esteemed the words of his mouth more than my necessary food*; that is, he looked upon it as his necessary food; he could as well have lived without his daily bread as without the word of God. *I have laid it up* (so the word is), as those that lay up provision for a siege, or as Joseph laid up corn before the famine. Eliphaz had told him to *lay up God's words in his heart*, ~~Job~~ Job 22:22. "I do," says he, "and always did, *that I might not sin against him*, and that, like the good householder, I might bring forth for the good of others." Note, The word of God is to our souls what our necessary food is to our bodies; it sustains the spiritual life and strengthens us for the actions of life; it is that which we cannot subsist without, and which nothing else can make up the want of: and we ought therefore so to esteem it, to take pains for it, hunger after it, feed upon it with delight, and nourish our souls with it; and this will be our rejoicing in the day of evil, as it was Job's here.

~~Job~~ JOB 23:13-17

MYSTERY OF PROVIDENCE

Some make Job to complain here that God dealt unjustly and unfairly with him in proceeding to punish him without the least relenting or relaxation, though he had such incontestable evidences to produce of his innocency. I am loth to think holy Job would charge the holy God with iniquity; but his complaint is indeed bitter and peevish, and he reasons himself into a sort of *patience per force*, which he cannot do without reflecting upon God as

dealing hardly with him, but he must bear it because he cannot help it; the worst he says is that God deals unaccountably with him.

I. He lays down good truths, and truths which were capable of a good improvement, v. 13, 14.

1. That God's counsels are immutable: *He is in one mind, and who can turn him? He is one* (so some read it) or *in one*; he has no counsellors by whose interest he might be prevailed with to alter his purpose: he has no counsellors by whose interest he might be prevailed with to alter his purpose: he is one with himself, and never alters his mind, never alters his measures. Prayer has prevailed to change God's way and his providence, but never was his will or purpose changed; for *known unto God are all his works*.

2. That his power is irresistible: *What his soul desires or designs even that he does*, and nothing can stand in his way or put him upon new counsels. Men desire many things which they may not do, or cannot do, or dare not do. But God has an incontestable sovereignty; his will is so perfectly pure and right that it is highly fit he should pursue all its determinations. And he has an uncontrollable power. *None can stay his hand. Whatever the Lord pleased that did he* (⁴¹⁸⁶Psalm 135:6), and always will, for it is always best.

3. That all he does is according to the counsel of his will (v. 14): *He performs the thing that is appointed for me*. Whatever happens to us, it is God that performs it (⁴⁵⁷²Psalm 57:2), and an admirable performance the whole will appear to be when the mystery of God shall be finished. He performs all that, and that only, which was appointed, and in the appointed time and method. This may silence us, for what is appointed cannot be altered. But to consider that, when God was appointing us to eternal life and glory as our end, he was appointing to this condition, this affliction, whatever it is, in our way, this may do more than silence us, it may satisfy us that it is all for the best; though what he does we know not now, yet we shall know hereafter.

4. That all he does is according to the custom of his providence: *Many such things are with him*, that is, He does many things in the course of his providence which we can give no account of, but must resolve into his absolute sovereignty. Whatever trouble we are in others have been in the like. Our case is not singular; the same *afflictions are accomplished in our*

brethren, ^{<618>}1 Peter 5:9. Are we sick or sore, impoverished and stripped? Are our children removed by death or our friends unkind? This is what *God has appointed for us, and many such things are with him. Shall the earth be forsaken for us?*

II. He makes but a bad use of these good truths. Had he duly considered them, he might have said, “Therefore am I easy and pleased, and well reconciled to the way of my God concerning me; therefore will I rejoice in hope that my troubles will issue well at last.” But he said, *Therefore am I troubled at his presence*, v. 15. Those are indeed of troubled spirits who are troubled at the presence of God, as the psalmist, who *remembered God and was troubled*, ^{<571>}Psalms 77:3. See what confusion poor Job was now in, for he contradicted himself: just now he was troubled for God's absence (v. 8, 9); now he is troubled at his presence. *When I consider, I am afraid of him*. What he now felt made him fear worse. There is indeed that which, if we consider it, will show that we have cause to be afraid of God — his infinite justice and purity, compared with our own sinfulness and vileness; but if, withal, we consider his grace in a Redeemer, and our compliance with that grace, our fears will vanish and we shall see cause to hope in him. See what impressions were made upon him by the wounds of his spirit.

1. He was very fearful (v. 16): *The Almighty troubled him, and so made his heart soft*, that is, utterly unable to bear any thing, and afraid of every thing that stirred. There is a gracious softness, like that of Josiah, whose heart was tender, and trembled at the word of God; but this is meant of a grievous softness which apprehends every thing that is present to be pressing and every thing future to be threatening.

2. He was very fretful, peevish indeed, for he quarrels with God,

(1.) Because he did not die before his troubles, that he might never have seen them (*Because I was not cut off before the darkness*, v. 17), and yet if, in the height of his prosperity, he had received a summons to the grave, he would have thought it hard. This may help to reconcile us to death, whenever it comes, that we do not know what evil we may be taken away from. But when trouble comes it is folly to wish we had not lived to see it and it is better to make the best of it.

(2.) Because he was left to live so long in his troubles, and the darkness was not covered from his face by his being hidden in the grave. We should

bear the darkness better than thus if we would but remember that to the upright there sometimes arises a marvellous light in the darkness; however, there is reserved for them a more marvellous light after it.