

Seven

ELIPHAZ—III

As we take a final look at Eliphaz, the first of Job's three 'comforters', we are going to hear Job call them 'miserable comforters'—because they did not bring him an awful lot of comfort!

We saw that Eliphaz's starting point was in chapter 4, verse 17: 'Can mortals be righteous before God? Can human beings be pure before their Maker?' This was something that came to him in that rather strange and mournful spiritual experience, when a spirit brought through this despondent message: 'Human beings cannot be righteous before God: how can we ever hope that human beings could be pure before their Maker?' He repeated that in chapter 15, verses 14–16: 'What are mortals, that they can be clean? Or those born of woman, that they can be righteous? God puts no trust even in his holy ones, and the heavens are not clean in his sight; how much less one who is abominable and corrupt, one who drinks iniquity like water!' That is what has determined Eliphaz's whole attitude to life and God: that really you cannot ever have a hope of being totally righteous and pure before God as a human being. Especially as a sinner: sin is such a deep and horrible thing—how could that ever be overcome or removed between us and God?

SIN IS NO LIGHT THING

Before we dismiss that, let us feel the force of it. Eliphaz is saying that sin is no light thing. Sometimes, because we have had the experience of forgiveness—we have come into God's grace—we forget the depth and the horror of sin. We have a natural tendency as human beings to underestimate that anyway, to justify ourselves in it. Sin also has its own inbuilt deceit which covers its tracks and tries to hide itself from us. But to God sin is no light thing. It cost Him the whole of His Son, going to the Cross and to the depths of human depravity and misery, to remove sin and to restore that wonderful relationship with God.

That is something that does bear in upon Eliphaz, and he is sensitive enough, and he knows God well enough, to know that sin is a real problem.

TOO HARD FOR US?

Also we need to check with ourselves to see, even though we know we have received God's forgiveness and are in His grace (if that is the case), whether we do not really believe deep down that what Eliphaz says is true: that we can never be pure before God. I was talking with a friend, a Christian pastor, and we were discussing Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7). As I listened to him talking about it, there was a sort of uneasiness within me. He was saying that in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was setting out the *ideal* of life in the kingdom of God, but of course we could never expect or hope to attain to that. When Jesus, for instance, spoke about God's teaching on divorce, he said, 'That is the ideal, and of course we must try to reach that, but so often we have to settle for something less'. (I don't know if he would have said the same about murder and adultery, which are also included in the Sermon on the Mount.) There is this feeling that there is the ideal, but then there is the real, practical thing: of course, we could never reach the ideal, but it is good to have an ideal that we can aim at, and fall short of all the time. When I indicated my uneasiness with that, he

said to me, 'Well, how do you look at the Sermon on the Mount?' I said, 'I think it is Jesus setting out the heart of the Law of God, and I would say to that exactly what Deuteronomy 30:11–14 says about the old Law: "For this commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?'" But the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.'" I don't think God ever gave us commandments intending that we should break them or that they should be too hard for us to do. Of course, all the commandments are to be kept, and can only be kept, in deep relationship with God. That is what the commandments are all about: they are life lived in direct relationship with God, and in dependence on Him, on His grace every moment. So when my friend was saying that Jesus set forth the ideal, but we can never reach it, I said, 'That sounds to me like a good excuse to settle for something less!' But he said, 'Oh no: we must *try*, we must always *try*! But every day we will fail, and every day we will need to kneel down at the end of the day and confess our sins and ask for forgiveness'. That sounds very orthodox, and that is just what Eliphaz would say. But I found it a rather depressing prospect, and I was wondering why. I think it is because underlying it is this deep despair that we could never be righteous before God.

Whereas we know, from the beginning of the Letter to the Ephesians (1:4–5), that God's whole plan is that He is going to bring us, as His children, to be holy and blameless before Him in love, face to face.

SINLESS PERFECTION?

Where we are coming from will determine how far we can go. Eliphaz, coming from his position, finds that he cannot go along with Job. Where is Job coming from? Let us look again at Job 19:25–27 (we will be looking at this again in detail—it is central to Job's position and quest): 'I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh *I shall see God*, whom I shall see *on my side*, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.' It is his *Redeemer* that he believes lives: Some one who can redeem him from evil, and bring him to be pure and holy and blameless before Him, and make Himself to be on his side. Job's basic position is: I *will* stand righteous and pure before my Maker. That sounds terrible to Eliphaz and the others. The only basis on which they think Job can say that is if he is claiming to have sinless perfection. That is the only way *they* could see that anyone could stand righteous and pure before God: if they had *never done anything wrong* and had been totally perfect all their lives. That is why they get so stuck into Job, because that is what they think he must be saying. They cannot hear that is not what he is saying. They think that is what he *must* be saying, because they do not know any other way out of it.

We have seen that Job has never said that. Job is very aware of his sins, especially those of his youth, in his foolish days. The difference in Job is that he has a faith in God that says: '*God* is able to make me stand before Him in holiness and righteousness'. That is why all the time he goes past his comforters and has to try and push past what they are saying—to get to God! To address God directly on this score. The comforters cannot come at that. They would not be so bold, they would not be so foolhardy. If they think there is no way out of it, that they want to keep their distance from God, really, as we shall see.

Right in the last chapter, when God Himself addresses the comforters, they do realise. When God says, 'Job was right, and you were wrong', and Job prays for them, and they repent, and that is lovely. In the meantime, however, it is pretty willing, right through.

QUICK TO ANGER

So Eliphaz has an orthodox belief in God—we have said before that these are very godly men in a godless age, and so they need to be respected for that—but Eliphaz did not have this faith that Job has, that God justifies the ungodly (as in Romans 4:5). Eliphaz is so aware of the appalling horror of sin, as far as he is able to be aware of that (I don't think any of us can be fully aware of it), and he takes that seriously, but he sees no way out. So in chapter 15, verses 17–35, he says, 'I will show you what happens to the wicked'. We see there very clearly that, as far as Eliphaz is concerned, there is no escape, there is no respite, there is no forgiveness, there is no end to wrath. Verse 30, for instance, talking of the wicked: 'they will not escape from darkness; the flame will dry up their shoots, and their blossom will be swept away by the wind.' He says, 'To think anything else is to fool oneself'. We saw that, corresponding to that, Eliphaz himself is quick to anger, is quite brutal and final in his application of anger, as in 5:3: 'I have seen fools taking root, but suddenly I cursed their dwelling'—and that was it, finish! They met their doom, and rightly so!

We saw that God is not like that. The lovely thing about God's wrath is that it comes to an end, when it has done its job, and brings us in to grace and mercy and love. So there is something about God that still Eliphaz has not realised.

Because of that, Eliphaz has got to find other ways of coping. In 5:19–27 we saw that he had a superficial prosperity teaching that said: God is high and powerful, but if you do the right thing, if you grovel for mercy, as he is trying to get Job to do here, and really just admit your sins and say you are on the wrong track and come back to God, and then do the right thing by God, then God will look after you, and you will have all the good things, and you will have all your descendants, and all your property and all your flocks and herds—everything that had been wiped out, that Job had lost—Eliphaz was saying he would have all this if he just did the right thing by God. That is the prosperity teaching that has been around again lately. But that does not fit the reality of Job, just as it did not fit the reality of Paul, or of Jesus himself—the righteous who suffered in the cause of God.

Job was ready to point that out to Eliphaz, as he points it out to the other comforters: that what you are saying just does not match up with reality. 'Here I am', he says. He does not say he has been sinless, but, he says, in this instance, 'I have not said a word against God, I have not charged God with wrong, and yet this is still happening to me, this terrible suffering. So what does that do to your prosperity doctrine?' We saw that Eliphaz got a little bit unnerved by that, and said, Well, I'm older than you are, and I ought to know, and there have been plenty of wise teachers who have said the same as I have said, so you had better just knuckle under and listen to what we are saying! Having had that doctrine taken away from him, Eliphaz will now have to come to another conclusion, as we shall see in chapter 22. In chapter 15 he has already started on that: he has already begun to say that Job must be terribly wicked, if all this is happening to him. 'You are doing away with the fear of God, and hindering meditation before God. For your *iniquity* teaches your mouth, and you choose the tongue of the crafty. Your own mouth condemns you, and not I; your own lips testify against you' (15:4–6). It is your sin that is telling you what to say now, and

did to His own Son in the Cross, and to take him through that, then God is not squeamish, and He is not fazed by the worst that can happen in the world. Forsyth wrote those words in the middle of the First World War, when there was a 'historic convulsion' going on in Europe such as had never been seen in the history of humankind. Yet, like Job, Forsyth was saying, 'It is God who is taking us through this, to carry out His purposes of good and of love. It is His *unrelenting love* that will not let us go, and that takes us *so seriously* as to not hold back even this kind of suffering. Because His purpose for us is so great, and His desire to take us there is so strong.'

So it is God's unrelenting love. We cannot expect Job to know that in the middle of this, any more than Jesus knew it when he cried out 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mark 15:34). That is not how it comes through when you are in the middle of these things. And yet Job was pressing through to know something of that. And he still claims in verse 17: 'There is no violence in my hands, and my prayer is pure': 'I have not charged God with wrong, I have said, "The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away". I have said, "Blessed be the name of the Lord", in all of this.'

FRIENDSHIP WITH GOD

And now we see where Job is coming to:

16:18 "O earth, do not cover my blood;
let my outcry find no resting place.
19 Even now, in fact, my witness is in heaven,
and he that vouches for me is on high.

That is his faith. He says, I can't see it, but I know that God sees me, and that He is going to vouch for me in the heavenly places.

16:20 My friends scorn me;
my eye pours out tears to God,
21 that he would maintain the right of a mortal with God,
as one does for a neighbour.

How different from Eliphaz's position! That He, *God*, would maintain the right of a mortal with God, as one does for a neighbour! It is from that position of *friendship with God* that Job is speaking. There is something that has affected that—his deep suffering—but he does not want to let that friendship go, and he is pressing through to it.

16:22 For when a few years have come,
I shall go the way from which I shall not return.

All I am faced with now is death, so let's find out what it is all about, and press through to that relationship with God.

FACED WITH DEATH

In chapter 17, Job goes on. He says, 'All I am faced with now is death. I am not going to say that is all there is.' Whereas the mockers, the comforters, are not being that honest. They are saying, 'No, come on, things can change'. He says, 'No. Face up to the fact of death'. This is what brings these great issues to bear:

17:1 My spirit is broken, my days are extinct,
 the grave is ready for me.
 2 Surely there are mockers around me,
 and my eye dwells on their provocation.

Then he speaks again to God:

17:3 Lay down a pledge for me with yourself;
 who is there that will give surety for me?

None of these comforters are going to be able to help me, or to guarantee me. So again, God, I am calling on You to do that for me.

17:4 Since you have closed their minds to understanding,
 therefore you will not let them triumph.

Job is asking God for vindication against these accusations that are starting to come from his friends.

17:5 Those who denounce friends for reward—
 the eyes of their children will fail.

We cannot say that the three comforters actually had their eye on Job's goods—as it was, he had nothing left anyway, so they could not have benefited much from his will! But he is saying, What you are doing is the equivalent to that: trying to pick the flesh from my bones, rather than help me.

He speaks again of the action of God in his life:

17:6 He has made me a byword of the peoples,
 and I am one before whom people spit.
 7 My eye has grown dim from grief,
 and all my members are like a shadow.
 8 The upright are appalled at this,
 and the innocent stir themselves up against the godless.
 9 Yet the righteous hold to their way,
 and they that have clean hands grow stronger and stronger.
 10 But you, come back now, all of you,
 and I shall not find a sensible person among you.
 11 My days are past, my plans are broken off,
 the desires of my heart.
 12 They make night into day;
 ‘The light,’ they say, ‘is near to the darkness.’
 13 If I look for Sheol as my house,
 if I spread my couch in darkness,
 14 if I say to the Pit, ‘You are my father,’
 and to the worm, ‘My mother,’ or ‘My sister,’
 15 where then is my hope?
 Who will see my hope?
 16 Will it go down to the bars of Sheol?
 Shall we descend together into the dust?”

What is Job saying there? He is saying (verse 9) that he is righteous before God, and that he is holding to his way, and he is being made stronger. They are certainly not making him doubt his position. They are just isolating him, really, by the things they

say, and making him more alone than ever. But that has not stopped him from holding firm to what he is saying before God. And so he says, 'Come on again!' They have had the first round: Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Eliphaz has started the second round, and Job says, 'Come on, keep coming! But', he says, 'you still haven't got it. You're saying I'm in darkness, but the light is about to dawn. But be real! "My days are past, my plans are broken off, the desires of my heart." So let's not fool ourselves about that. Don't try and make night into day. I am faced squarely with death, but if I succumb to that, and if I let all my hope go down that drain, I can't let that be the end either. I just can't embrace death as the final outcome of all of this. I know there's got to be more to it than that.' More than that Job cannot say at this point. He leaves it there.

JOB MUST BE TERRIBLY WICKED

Eliphaz's final address is in chapter 22. Here the mask comes right off Eliphaz, and he accuses Job of outright sin and iniquity and wickedness. That is the way he has to go, if that prosperity doctrine has been denied him, and Job has said that does not fit. He needs to come to another conclusion, and his conclusion is that God is high and mighty, and He is far removed from us: so far above us that really in effect it makes little difference to Him whether we are good or bad. But if this is happening to Job, he must have been *terribly* wicked for God to have taken this much notice of him, to bring all these sufferings on him that have come now. So now Eliphaz must come out and accuse Job of all kinds of wickedness. That is the only way he can make sense, according to his own scheme of thinking, of what is happening to Job.

22:1 Then Eliphaz the Temanite answered:

2 'Can a mortal be of use to God?

Can even the wisest be of service to him?

3 Is it any pleasure to the Almighty if you are righteous,

or is it gain to him if you make your ways blameless?

Again, this is his basis: he says, 'No. What does God care about us really? Even if we are so righteous, or so blameless, what does that do for Him? Is it gain or pleasure to Him? Surely He is so high and mighty that this cannot touch Him!'

We know that is not so. We have heard God Himself saying, Look at my servant Job: an upright and blameless man!—delighting in him before Satan. That is not the way Eliphaz understands it, because he does not think anyone can be righteous before God. He says,

22:4 Is it for your piety that he reproves you,
and enters into judgment with you?

You are saying, Job, that you do fear God, and that you are pious and righteous before Him. But *if that is so, why is this happening to you now*—this reproof, this judgment that has come upon you—if you are as good as you say you are?

So then he catalogues all the things he thinks Job must have done wrong, to merit this kind of treatment. Look at them: withholding bread from the hungry, taking over land from people, and sitting secure while other people have nothing, sending the widows away empty, crushing the arms of the orphans, even ripping off your own family:

5 Is not your wickedness great?

There is no end to your iniquities.
 6 For you have exacted pledges from your family for no reason,
 and stripped the naked of their clothing.
 7 You have given no water to the weary to drink,
 and you have withheld bread from the hungry.
 8 The powerful possess the land,
 and the favoured live in it.
 9 You have sent widows away empty-handed,
 and the arms of the orphans you have crushed.
 10 Therefore snares are around you,
 and sudden terror overwhelms you,
 11 or darkness so that you cannot see;
 a flood of water covers you.

We know that Job has done none of that. Job refutes that in chapters 29 and 31 and says, 'No, that is not the way I have been. You cannot make those claims against me.'

GOD IS HIGH AND MIGHTY

Then Eliphaz seeks to set forth the high-and-mightiness of God. This is fair enough. As we have said, there are many things that Eliphaz and the others say that are right and true.

22:12 Is not God high in the heavens?
 See the highest stars, how lofty they are!

God is higher, even taller, than anything else: even if He stood on the ground, His head would be way above the heavens—if we can talk in that way. God is bigger than everything. Eliphaz has got that right, but he has not got it right in that he omits to say that the Lord descends to look on the lowly (as in Psalm 113:5–9). Eliphaz has got only one side of it.

22:13 Therefore you say, 'What does God know?
 Can he judge through the deep darkness?
 14 Thick clouds enwrap him, so that he does not see,
 and he walks on the dome of heaven.'

Eliphaz is saying, That is what Job has said. But there is nowhere that Job has said that, if we examine what has happened up to now. Job has said, God is holding back from me in my despair, and He is not coming to help me, in fact He is aiming His arrows at me. Job is not saying that God is so high and mighty and far removed that He does not know what is going on. That is something that has come from Eliphaz's own heart.

SCORN FOR THE WAY OF THE WICKED

So Eliphaz again spells out how the wicked are dealt with by God and cannot prosper. The righteous, by which he means himself and his cronies, he says: 'We see it, we laugh them to scorn, and are glad that God has dealt with the wicked, because we won't have any truck with the wicked. Maybe God fills their houses with good things, but as far as I am concerned, the counsel of the wicked is far from me: I will not have anything to do with them, and I am glad when I see them come to their end':

22:15 Will you keep to the old way
 that the wicked have trod?

- 16 They were snatched away before their time;
their foundation was washed away by a flood.
- 17 They said to God, 'Leave us alone,'
and 'What can the Almighty do to us?'
- 18 Yet he filled their houses with good things—
but the plans of the wicked are repugnant to me.
- 19 The righteous see it and are glad;
the innocent laugh them to scorn,
- 20 saying, 'Surely our adversaries are cut off,
and what they left, the fire has consumed.'

COME BACK TO GOD

In these last verses, Eliphaz urges Job to come back to God. Again, these words show that Eliphaz is a godly man, and that relationship with God is very important to him:

- 22:21 Agree with God, and be at peace;
in this way good will come to you.
- 22 Receive instruction from his mouth,
and lay up his words in your heart.
- 23 If you return to the Almighty, you will be restored,
if you remove unrighteousness from your tents,
- 24 if you treat gold like dust,
and gold of Ophir like the stones of the torrent-bed,

—if you count these possessions that you have lost as nothing, and do not set great store by them, and have God as your true treasure—how lovely!—

- 22:25 and if the Almighty is your gold
and your precious silver,
- 26 then you will delight yourself in the Almighty,
and lift up your face to God.
- 27 You will pray to him, and he will hear you,
and you will pay your vows.
- 28 You will decide on a matter, and it will be established for you,
and light will shine on your ways.
- 29 When others are humiliated, you say it is pride;
for he saves the humble.

Eliphaz is trying to get Job to come back to God. On what basis is he doing that? One translation of verse 30 is:

- 22:30 (*RSV*) He delivers the innocent man;
you will be delivered through the cleanness of your hands.

If that is what he actually said (the meaning of the Hebrew is uncertain at this point), then he is coming back to a fairly barren legalism: always do the right thing, and God will do the right thing by you. But the meaning may well be:

- 22:30 (*NRSV*) He will deliver even those who are guilty;
they will escape because of the cleanness of your hands.'

It may be that even Eliphaz has some understanding of the forgiveness of God. He is, after all, calling on Job to repent, and come back to God, and is saying that God will bless him if he does that, and he will be blessed in his relationship with God.

PREACHING TO THE CONVERTED

However, sometimes we can say these things and be out of place. If you are talking to someone who is already a Christian, and telling them to get converted—ever done that, or seen someone trying to do that to you?—it is not the right time or place. You are talking to the wrong person. That is what Eliphaz is doing here. Job has done all of that. He knows it. He is right in there—closer, if we can put it that way, than Eliphaz is himself.

Our children, when they were younger, went from time to time to some of the evangelistic meetings held by the aboriginal church in the town where we were. There was always a call out to the front, to give your life to the Lord. On more than one occasion, one or two of our children had gone out to the front in response to these calls. Then it came time for their Confirmation in the Anglican scheme of things, and we said, 'Before you can be confirmed, you really need to know where you stand with regard to God, and you need to be able to give your life to God'. One of our children said, 'Well, I've done that three times already—how many more times have I got to do it?' That is a bit like what Eliphaz is doing to Job here!