

Job 37:20

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Shall it be told him that I speak? if a man speak, surely he shall be swallowed up.

Analysis

Shall it be told him that I speak?—Elihu questions whether humans should even presume to demand God's attention. The Hebrew verb סָפַר (saphar, 'told/recounted') suggests formal reporting. **If a man speak** with complaints or accusations against God, **surely he shall be swallowed up** (יִבְלָע, yebula). The verb בָּלַע (bala) means to swallow, engulf, destroy—the same word describes the earth swallowing Korah (Numbers 16:30) and death swallowing up forever in messianic hope (Isaiah 25:8).

Elihu warns that presumptuous speech before God invites judgment. This echoes Ecclesiastes 5:2: 'Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God.' Yet remarkably, God later criticizes Elihu's friends for not speaking rightly, while Job—despite his protests—spoke truth (Job 42:7-8). The resolution: humble lament differs from arrogant accusation. Job's questions arose from relationship; his friends' certainties arose from pride. God welcomes honest wrestling but judges presumptuous certainty about His ways.

Historical Context

Ancient Near Eastern court protocol required careful speech before royalty—rash words could mean death. Elihu applies this to addressing God, the ultimate King. His warning reflects wisdom literature's theme of measured speech (Proverbs 10:19, 17:27-28). However, later biblical revelation shows God welcomes honest cries (Psalms, Lamentations) while rejecting hypocritical formality (Isaiah 29:13).

Related Passages

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Study Questions

1. How do you distinguish between honest lament (which God welcomes) and presumptuous accusation (which He judges)?
2. When has fear of being 'swallowed up' kept you from bringing honest questions to God, and was that fear warranted?
3. What does the Bible's inclusion of Job's protests teach about God's tolerance for human struggle with understanding His ways?

Interlinear Text

הִיִּסְפָּר	לִּי	כִּי	אֲדַבֵּר	אִם	אֶמַּר	אִם	יֵשׁ	אִם	כִּי
Shall it be told	H0	H3588	him that I speak	H518	speak		if a man		H3588
H5608			H1696		H559		H376		

יִבְלָע:
surely he shall be swallowed up
H1104