

Series Job

This Message I Am Waiting

Scripture Job chapters 27, 28, 29, 30, 31

Each week we are getting closer to the end of our study of the book of Job. How's that for a logical statement! Today we will think about the final speech of Job. Next week we will consider the words of Elihu, an angry young man, who waited until the three friends and Job had finished their dialogue before he had his say. Then in two weeks we will bring the study to a close by thinking about the words spoken by God.

One of the observations in this book is about how Job's faith was challenged and "stretched" by his experience as a sufferer. Typically, we as believers learn our most significant spiritual lessons when we face difficulties. That's when we ask "why" questions. That's when we are forced to think beyond our existing levels of understanding. Our difficulties cause us to think about our circumstances in new ways — "out-of-the-old-box" ways. Spiritually speaking, our awareness of God's grace and mercy can expand to match the new circumstances in which we find ourselves. Our appreciation of God can increase as we experience His comfort and as He calms our anxieties. New spiritual challenges force us to consider new aspects of faith and the ways of God.

God sometimes uses pain and trouble as a means of training and disciplining His people. God does not totally shield His followers from earthly dangers, diseases, and other kinds of stress. He wants them to maintain an attitude of dependence on Him, to trust Him for guidance in day-by-day living. God knows that His people are inclined to become spiritually casual and lackadaisical when their lives are free of challenges. He knows that His followers will not have a testimony to non-believers until their faith is proven by how they handle the stresses of life. Life throws us many surprises and difficulties. How we handle them determines our spiritual growth and the depth of our appreciation of God.

We can assume that Job was engaged in deep thought and reflection about his circumstances since the day of his devastating losses. His experience of suffering did not fit with his previous existing understanding of the behavior of God. He completely understood the declarations of his friends because he probably shared their theology up until he was hit with his losses and pain. That's when he realized that righteous people sometimes suffer and the wicked are often not punished. He had many "why" questions. He was forced to reevaluate his spiritual understanding because he knew he was not guilty of any wrongdoing and yet he was suffering.

Job had undoubtedly been praying for understanding; for some pathway out of his confusion and emotional distress. His first words were characterized by bitterness and hopelessness. However, the theme of hope began to appear in his words in the middle chapters of the book. Job gradually came to the conclusion that the same God who had become his enemy, had to, in an ultimate sense, also be the God of justice. Although he was perplexed by the apparent inconsistencies and arbitrariness of God actions, he concluded that there would be a time when justice would be served and he would be vindicated.

Job did not expect this to happen before his death, but he held on to his hope and expectation that there would be a time when God would call him forth from the grave in order to make his vindication public. He was certain that he would have a face-to-face meeting with God. His thoughts about resurrection represented a significant faith development and pointed him toward a new theological understanding. He would never have had to think about these things if his afflictions had not been allowed by God. Job did not get all the details about this worked out, but his unanticipated experience of suffering impelled him to look to God in new and hopeful ways. And, for your information, we will learn that Job's spiritual understanding will continue to expand to the end of the book.

There is one more topic I want to include in this review. The author of this book used a unique style of writing to help his readers (us) to grasp the spiritual issues of the story. He set up a series of contrasts. Let me call your attention to some of these important contrasts.

For Job the basic theological issue was the disconnect between his beliefs about God and his personal experience. At the beginning of the story there was no tension: Job feared God and God blessed Job. They had an ideal interactive relationship.

After God praised Job before the Accuser, the Accuser challenged God to let Job's devotion be tested, and God gave permission. It was at this point that Job's daily experience was no longer in harmony with his belief: Job feared God but God turned against him.

In spite of his losses and debilitating disease, Job continued to fear God. Initially he mourned his plight without bitterness. He indicated his acceptance of his condition with simple statements such as, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart," and "The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised," and "Shall we not accept good from God and not trouble?" (*Job 1:20-21; 2:10*). However, after the arrival of his friends, he lamented loudly and bitterly. He cursed the day of his birth (*chapter 3*). Passive acceptance of his circumstances became bitter objection.

The friends strongly believed that godly people always prosper and that wicked people are always punished in this life, but Job, based on his personal experience and observation, was convinced that their beliefs were not valid. Job and his friends wound up making some very strong and sarcastic remarks to each other. There was a clash of opinions.

The friends accused Job of being a sinner and exhorted him to confess his sins in order to once again obtain benefit from God's favor. Job, however, insisted on his innocence and rejected their counsel. Advice given; advice rejected.

The friends proclaimed their wisdom and knowledge of God and His ways, but Job accused them of ignorance and deceptive statements. "We're right." "No, you're wrong."

Job pleaded for mercy and for vindication, but God was silent and did not respond.

Job believed that God was just, but he was confused because he continued to experience suffering for no apparent reason. He accused God of injustice and of being a capricious deity, yet affirmed that God was his witness and redeemer.

There are several more of these contrasts, but these examples are enough to illustrate how the author has moved the story along in dramatic fashion.

Today we will concentrate on the closing arguments and thoughts of Job. We begin with a passage in which Job affirmed his innocence and determination to be faithful to God.

Read Job 27:1-6

1 Job continued his discourse: 2 “As surely as God lives, who has denied me justice, the Almighty, who has made me taste bitterness of soul, 3 as long as I have life within me, the breath of God in my nostrils, 4 my lips will not speak wickedness, and my tongue will utter no deceit. 5 I will never admit you (the friends) are in the right; till I die, I will not deny my integrity. 6 I will maintain my righteousness and never let go of it; my conscience will not reproach me as long as I live.”

Job began this statement with a strong solemn oath. In the Old Testament, the phrase, “As surely as God lives,” was used to affirm the truth of declarations. Job was affirming that his statements were as certain and true as the reality of God’s existence. It is interesting that Job swore this oath in the name of the same God whom he accused in the same verse of “denying him justice” and “making his soul bitter.”

I hope you recognize how much Job was pulled back and forth between his two conceptions of God. On the one hand, God was the powerful controller of all that happens in the world and was therefore responsible for all of Job’s misfortunes, and on the other hand, God was the loving moral force who governed the universe with fairness and order and therefore the One who could be approached with the hope of being granted justice and vindication.

There is some controversy about who was speaking in the last part of chapter 27 and throughout chapter 28. Many commentators doubt that it was Job, but there is no consensus about who it was. Therefore I will take the position that Job was the speaker. Most of chapter 27 is a discourse about the fate of the wicked. It is a refutation of the statements made by the friends. They insisted that God always punishes evildoers in this life. Job pointed out that, to the contrary, evildoers often prosper in this life, and that their destruction by God would be after their deaths. The friends insisted on immediate judgment; Job, in contrast, argued for ultimate judgment.

Chapter 28 is a discourse about wisdom. The dialogue between the friends and Job had ended in an unsatisfactory way. The friends were convinced that they knew God’s ways. However, their traditional wisdom did not fit with Job’s situation. When their back-and-forth dialogue ended, Job was still searching for a new and better way of understanding God. Neither side had a grasp of truth and reality.

The thrust of chapter 28 is that it was not possible for men to understand the profound mysteries of God. The first part of chapter 28 was an illustration of the engineering skills of men. The speaker described how men were able to tunnel into the earth to find gold and copper ore and precious stones. He pointed out that this was just one example of the many incredible accomplishments of humans, but they could not discover wisdom. Wisdom, unlike gold and copper ore, is beyond the reach of people. There are gaps and limits on human understanding. In particular, people cannot discern how earthly events fit into God's purposes. At the end of chapter 28, we read this conclusion:

Job 28:20-24, 28

20 "Where then does wisdom come from? Where does understanding dwell? 21 It is hidden from the eyes of every living thing, concealed even from the birds of the air (who are able to see a bigger picture than can earth-bound people). 22 Destruction and Death say, 'Only a rumor of it has reached our ears.' 23 God understands the way to it and he alone knows where it dwells, 24 for he views the ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens. 28 And he said to man, "The fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding."

According to the speaker, only God knows where wisdom can be found. He alone is omniscient. "He can see everything under the heavens" in an instant. This description of God's ability was in contrast to the laborious efforts of humans to discover a few things of value. All of their scientific investigations, technological advances, and intellectual achievements fail to provide for them what is most important in life. The point is that wisdom is not to be found in things at all. Wisdom is found in "the fear of the Lord." "The fear of the Lord" involves submission and obedience to Him, and worship of Him. It requires trust and confidence that He knows what is right and best. These attitudes are associated with righteousness and holiness.

In a negative sense, true wisdom requires the avoidance of evil. This means that a person must regulate his/her actions so that God is not displeased. The truly wise person will have his/her life centered on the person of God, not self.

Chapter 28 was a rebuke to the incomplete and incorrect "wisdom" of the friends. Job considered their theological outlook to be false. The conclusion of chapter 28 is that if humans will approach God with appropriate fear and reverence, God will be with them and guide them through their challenges. And if a person trusts God and is obedient to Him, it will not be necessary for that person to know the answer to every puzzling question about life. This thought anticipates the conclusion of this book. We will return to this thought in two weeks.

The closing verse of chapter 28 is a link to the next three chapters. It is a verse by which we, as readers, can evaluate the statements made by Job, and, in the next three chapters, we learn a lot about Job's life. In chapter 29 he reflected on his life before affliction, which were years of blessings and happiness. In chapter 30 he lamented his current sufferings and the fact that God had not responded to him. In chapter 31 he offered proofs of his loyalty to God and once more proclaimed his innocence. That's the overview of his final words.

In chapter 29 Job expressed his longing for the good old days.

Read Job 29:1-6

1 Job continued his discourse: 2 "How I long for the months gone by, for the days when God watched over me, 3 when his lamp shone upon my head and by his light I walked through darkness! 4 Oh, for the days when I was in my prime, when God's intimate friendship blessed my house, 5 when the Almighty was still with me and my children were around me, 6 when my path was drenched with cream and the rock poured out for me streams of olive oil.

Verse 6 is a poetic way to describe prosperity. In this nostalgic reflection on the past, the first thing Job mentioned was his fellowship with God. In his pre-disaster days, he had followed the guidance of God, and his friendship with God was "intimate." These were "golden years" when all was right with God. In later verses he mentioned his children and referred to his prosperity. In other verses in this chapter he spoke of the respect and prestige accorded to him by all people. He also spoke of his expectations:

Read Job 29: 18-20

18 "I thought, 'I will die in my own house, my days as numerous as the grains of sand. 19 My roots will reach to the water, and the dew will lie all night on my branches (= be nourished and healthy). 20 My glory will remain fresh in me, the bow ever new in my hand.'

Unfortunately, Job's expectations did not unfold as he anticipated. The theme of chapter 30 is on the reversal of his fortunes. In an echo of a statement made when he received the news of all his losses, chapter 29 was a description of what the Lord had given; chapter 30 of what the Lord had taken away. Job was disrespected by everyone instead of being honored. He was disregarded by God rather than being blessed. Despondency replaced happiness. He was pushed to a low point spiritually, socially, emotionally, and physically.

Read Job 30:16-19

16 "Now my life ebbs away; days of suffering grip me. 17 Night pierces my bones; my gnawing pains never rest. 18 In his great power, God grasps my clothing; he binds me like the neck of my garment. 19 He throws me into the mud, and I am reduced to dust and ashes."

Job's cries to God for help had been ignored, and his efforts to get God's attention had proven useless. For Job, the cruelty of God was shown both in the afflictions which had been brought upon him and also in God's refusal to answer when he sought help.

Read Job 30:20-23

20 "I cry out to you, O God, but you do not answer; I stand up, but you merely look at me. 21 You turn on me ruthlessly; with the might of your hand you attack me. 22 You snatch me up and drive me before the wind; you toss me about in the storm. 23 I know you will bring me down to death, to the place appointed for all the living."

Job summarized his status with the following statement:

Read Job 30:26

26 "When I hoped for good, evil came; when I looked for light, then came darkness."

In chapter 31, Job declared once again that his miseries were undeserved. He called attention to the quality of his life. Here are some examples:

Read Job 31: 5-28 excerpts

5 "If I have walked in falsehood or my foot has hurried after deceit, ... 7 if my steps have turned from the path, if my heart has been led by my eyes, or if my hands have been defiled, 8 then may others eat what I have sown, and may my crops be uprooted." 16 "If I have denied the desires of the poor or let the eyes of the widow grow weary, 17 if I have kept my bread to myself, not sharing it with the fatherless, ... 19 if I have seen anyone perishing for lack of clothing, or a needy man without a garment; ... 21 if I have raised my hand against the fatherless, ... 24 if I have put my trust in gold, ... 25 if I have rejoiced over my great wealth, ... 28 then these would be sins to be judged, for I would have been unfaithful to God on high."

Most of us have made statements that are similar to those of Job. For examples, "May God strike me dead if I am not telling the truth," and "Cross my heart and hope to die." In effect, Job was placing a curse on himself. He knew that if he had been guilty of any of the sins listed in this chapter, then he would deserve punishment. He cited both public sins and inner sins. He had been concerned not only with outward behavior but also with inner attitudes. In every way, whether in areas of sensual desires or dishonesty, or abuse of power in regard to others, or a focus on materialism and idolatry, or hypocrisy, Job was certain that he had done no wrong.

Near the end of the chapter, Job made a final effort to have God answer him.

Read Job 31:35

35 “Oh, that I had someone to hear me! I sign now my defense; let the Almighty answer me; let my accuser (God) put his indictment in writing.”

Job did his best to force a response from God. Figuratively he attached his signature to his oath. He asked God to respond to his oath with either vindication or whatever punishment he deserved. Without a response from God, Job had no way to know if something had gone wrong and what he could do to remedy it. Job was not ashamed of his behaviors. He was confident of his innocence.

By the end of chapter 31, Job had said all he knew to say. The next move would be up to God. Would God meet with him or not? Would God explain the reasons for his suffering or not? Would God accept him on the basis of his ethical record and withdraw the punishment or make known to him some fault which had not been revealed? Why? Why? Why? Job could only wait and suffer.