

Job 2: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Job chapter 2. Again there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the Lord. And the Lord said to Satan, From where have you come? Satan answered the Lord and said, From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it. And the Lord said to Satan, Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil? He still holds fast his integrity, although you incited me against him to destroy him without reason. Then Satan answered the Lord and said, Skin for skin, all that a man has he will give for his life. But stretch out your hand and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face. And the Lord said to Satan, Behold, he is in your hand, only spare his life. So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord, and struck Job with loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. And he took a piece of broken pottery with which to scrape himself while he sat in the ashes. Then his wife said to him,

Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die. But he said to her, You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil? In all this Job did not sin with his lips. Now when Job's three friends heard of all this evil that had come upon him, they came each from his own place, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. They made an appointment together to come to show him sympathy and comfort him. And when they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him. And they raised their voices and wept, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads toward heaven. And they sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights. And no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great. Satan's first attempt to get Job to curse God in Job chapter 1 had failed utterly. Rather than cursing the Lord as Satan had hoped, Job had actually ended the chapter by blessing the Lord.

And so in Job chapter 2, he begins another assault. The passage opens with an episode that is pointedly similar to that of chapter 1 verses 6 to 8. It repeats many of the same elements, almost word for word. That passage read, Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them. The Lord said to Satan, From where have you come? Satan answered the Lord and said, From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.

And the Lord said to Satan, Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil? Save for a few minor changes, this passage is repeated at the beginning of chapter 2. It is as if the text is underlining the fact that Satan is back to square 1. In response to Satan's confident pronouncement in the preceding chapter, the Lord had given him the right to take all of Job's possessions. However, now, as a sore loser, Satan comes back and complains that the terms weren't fair. The test of chapter 1 was not a true test. For it to be a true test, Satan should be allowed to attack Job's own body. Many proposed interpretations have been given for Satan's statement, skin for skin. Some have suggested, for instance, that it refers to the willingness of Job to give up the skins of other people for his own skin, or perhaps the skin of his wealth and his possessions for his own body. David Klein suggests that the meaning of the expression is more prospective in its force. Satan is saying that although you may attack a person's possessions, that is not the same thing as attacking their own body. If you attack their own person, they will attack your person in response. If the Lord strikes Job, Job will strike back at him.

This seems to be pretty much the import of verse 5. Even though Satan has lost the former contest, and has no right to claim that it was unfair, as he consented to his terms earlier, the Lord accepts the second contest. He removes his protection from Job, and allows Satan to attack Job's body. He

does so by afflicting Job with loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. The exact character of this affliction is not entirely clear, although it might remind us of the sixth plague of boils upon the Egyptians. In Leviticus chapter 13, the same terminology as is used here is used in reference to something in association with leprosy. Likewise, in Deuteronomy chapter 28 verse 35, The Lord will strike you on the knees and on the legs with grievous boils of which you cannot be healed, from the sole of your foot to the crown of your head. The affliction in question may be something that was particularly associated with the wrath of the Lord, singling out a particular person.

[4 : 57] Job has been struck by plagues, not just plagues on his property, but now plagues upon his person. It would seem that he has been singled out for judgment. Such a skin condition that might be regarded as a divine plague might also see him shunned by society. He sits out in the ashes and uses a piece of broken pottery to scrape himself. Perhaps the implication is that he is cast out from ordinary human society. He is seated in the trash heap, along with discarded ashes and broken pieces of pottery. Of course, the ashes and the broken pottery also have an affinity with Job himself.

The human body is connected with dust and also with ashes, which is the sort of dust that is left over after fire has consumed. Likewise, if the human body can be compared to a piece of pottery or a vessel, a broken body can be compared to a broken piece of pottery. To compound Job's distress, his wife's voice joins with that of the serpent, tempting him to abandon his integrity and to curse God.

We might perhaps hear echoes of Adam and Eve here. Job, however, unlike Adam, resists his wife's temptation. Recognizing the sovereignty of a gracious God over all of the affairs of our lives, Job declares his willingness to receive from God what God gives. God has given Job unmerited blessings. Job did not complain, and he is not going to complain beneath the heavy hand of God's providence. Once again, faced with the test, Job has not failed. News of Job's distress reaches his three friends, Bildad the Shuhite, Eliphaz the Temanite, and Zophar the Naamathite. They come to visit Job with the intention of showing him sympathy. Commentators differ over the meaning of verse 12. What does it mean that the friends do not recognize Job? Is the point that Job has become unrecognizable, or is the point that they do not acknowledge him? David Clines argues that the latter is the point. They proceed to engage in seven days of mourning, as you would for an important figure, but they are largely acting as if

Job were not there, as if he were already dead. The Job on the ash heap is, as it were, just the shell of the man that they used to know. They don't acknowledge him, and they don't speak to him. It isn't entirely clear whether or not this is the intended meaning, but if it were, it might help to make more sense of the way that Job speaks of them later, as those who had betrayed him. As his three friends, these men may be the close counsellors of King Job. Yet in their mourning of him, far from acting as loyal counsellors and friends, they are acting as if he were no longer alive, confirming his expulsion.

The meaning of their action of sprinkling dust on their heads towards heaven is also unclear. Many commentators have seen in this something beyond just a mere act of mourning. Some, for instance, have seen a suggestive connection between this and Exodus chapter 9 verses 8 to 10, in connection with the sixth plague of boils. And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, Take handfuls of soot from the kiln, and let Moses throw them in the air in the sight of Pharaoh. It shall become fine dust over all the land of Egypt, and become boils, breaking out in sores on man and beast throughout all the land of Egypt. So they took soot from the kiln, and stood before Pharaoh, and Moses threw it in the air, and it became boils, breaking out in sores on man and beast. A question to consider, how can this chapter help us in thinking about the providence of God?