Job 7: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 09 April 2021

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[0:00] Job chapter 7. Has not man a hard service on earth, and are not his days like the days of a hired hand, like a slave who longs for the shadow, and like a hired hand who looks for his wages?

So I am allotted months of emptiness, and nights of misery are apportioned to me. When I lie down, I say, When shall I arise? But the night is long, and I am full of tossing till the dawn.
My flesh is clothed with worms and dirt. My skin hardens, then breaks out afresh. My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle, and come to their end without hope.
Remember that my life is a breath. My eye will never again see good. The eye of him who sees me will behold me no more. While your eyes are on me, I shall be gone.
As the cloud fades and vanishes, so he who goes down to Sheol does not come up. He returns no more to his house, nor does his place know him any more. Therefore I will not restrain my mouth. I will speak in the anguish of my spirit.
[1:02] I will complain in the bitterness of my soul. Am I the sea, or a sea monster, that you set a guard over me? When I say, My bed will comfort me, my couch will ease my complaint, then you scare me with dreams, and terrify me with visions, so that I would choose strangling and death, rather than my bones.

I loathe my life. I would not live forever. Leave me alone, for my days are a breath. What is man, that you make so much of him, and that you set your heart on him? Visit him every morning, and test him every moment.
How long will you not look away from me, nor leave me alone till I swallow my spit? If I sin, what do I do to you, you watcher of mankind? Why have you made me your mark? Why have I become a burden to you?
Why do you not pardon my transgression, and take away my iniquity? For now I shall lie in the earth. You will seek me, but I shall not be. In Job chapter 7, Job concludes his first response to one of the speeches of his friends, to the speech of Eliphaz the Temanite, in chapters 4 to 5.
However, whereas most of chapter 6 was addressed to Eliphaz and the friends, this chapter is mostly addressed to the Lord. Job's suffering has become so all-consuming, that it gives him a perspective upon humanity as a whole.
[2:19] He presents humanity's situation as akin to that of a slave doing hard labour, or a hired hand waiting in vain for his wages. Like such figures, the days are agonisingly long for Job.

The slave longs for the shadow, for relief from his labour, and the hired hand waits for his wages at the end of the day, and Job describes his months of emptiness. However, whereas these figures may find some relief at the end of their labours, Job's toils of the day are succeeded by even more toilsome nights.
He tosses and turns and gets no rest. He longs for the day to come and the night to end, even though his days are so extremely bitter. His suffering is Sisyphean. It is futile and meaningless, a cycle that repeats day after day, night after night, and there is no relief to be had.
His flesh is clothed with worms and dirt, as if he were already anticipating his burial. His wounds start to scab over, and then his foul boils break open again.
In verses 6-10 he expresses the fleetingness of his life. His days move like a swift weaver's shuttle through the fabric, and the thread is removed. His life has the brevity of a breath that is soon expired.
[3:32] While the Lord watches him, he will soon vanish away. He has nothing left to look forward to in this life. His life is as insubstantial and transitory as a cloud. It will soon pass away and leave nothing behind it.

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We might here recall the image of the vapour at the beginning of the book of Ecclesiastes. Considering the fragility and brevity of human life, it is a source of great anguish to Job that the Lord seems to be so set upon inflicting misery upon him in the brief span of life remaining to him. Within the cosmogonic myths of the ancient Near East, the sea and the sea monster were both personified forces that were pacified and tamed in the process of creation. While Job might not be alluding to such creation myths, he here uses imagery that we find elsewhere in the scripture. The Lord tames the might of the sea, keeping it within its bounds. The Leviathan, the great sea monster, is his pet and under his control. Job had spoken of rousing this monster back in chapter 3. If Job were like the sea or like the Leviathan, it would make sense for the Lord to pay so much attention to him, to breaking him down and mastering him. But Job is nothing of the kind. [4:41] He's a short-lived human being of little consequence. And yet the Lord is giving him no respite. He longs for the relief of sleep. But the Lord torments him with troubling visions and dreams.

Toby Sumter suggests that Job is addressing Eliphaz at this point. Eliphaz has related the dream that he had in chapter 4, and the night vision that he described was supposed to terrify Job. I don't think that is actually Job's meaning here. Rather, the wider arguments suggest that Job is addressing the Lord at this point. Harried and troubled by the Lord in every waking and sleeping moment, Job wishes he could be strangled or to die, rather than to continue such an existence. Such an existence has become loathsome to him. More than anything else, he just wants the Lord to leave him alone. The Lord's unceasing torment of him is utterly intolerable, and seems so disproportionate to a creature of such small consequence. In verse 17, we have what might be an ironic allusion to Psalm 8, verses 3 to 6. The psalmist marvels at the grace and the condescension of the Lord to take notice of such a small creature. [6:07] For the psalmist, the Lord's attention to mankind is a wonderful thing, an expression of the most incredible grace. For Job, however, the Lord's paying attention to mankind is a terrible thing.

The Lord's visiting of mankind in the psalm is expressed in his caring for mankind. For Job, it's a constant testing. The Lord simply won't let him out of his sight. He's exposing him to the harshest trial, and more than anything else, Job just wants the Lord to ignore him. Why should the Lord even take notice of such a puny creature? The Lord won't even look away from him for long enough for him to swallow his spit. David Clines argues that Job's point in verse 20 is not that the sin of humankind is so small that it should be paid no attention by a holy God, but rather that any sin committed by the righteous Job, a man teetering on the brink of the grave, cannot be of such extreme significance that it merits singling him out from all other human beings for such horrific treatment. Job at this point is, as it were, calling out to God, Stop! Stop! I'm already dead. Whatever sin it is that he might be guilty of, can the Lord not just forgive it and allow Job to die in peace? This is the one hope remaining to him. A question to consider. Reading this passage alongside Psalm 8, how can it help us to reflect upon the significance that the Lord gives to humankind? [7:32] [redacted]

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