

Job 17: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Job chapter 17 My spirit is broken, my days are extinct, the graveyard is ready for me. Surely there are markers about me, and my eyes dwells on their provocation.

Lay down a pledge for me with you. Who is there who will put up security for me? Since you have closed their hearts to understanding, therefore you will not let them triumph. He who informs against his friends to get a share of their property, the eyes of his children will fail.

He has made me a byword of the peoples, and I am one before whom men spit. My eye has grown dim from vexation, and all my members are like a shadow.

The upright are appalled at this, and the innocent stirs himself against the godless. Yet the righteous holds to his way, and he who has clean hands grows stronger and stronger.

But you, come on again, all of you, and I shall not find a wise man among you. My days are past, my plans are broken off, the desires of my heart.

[1 : 0 1] They make night into day, the light, they say, is near to the darkness. If I hope for Sheol as my house, if I make my bed in darkness, if I say to the pit, you are my father, and to the worm, my mother or my sister, where then is my hope?

Who will see my hope? Will it go down to the bars of Sheol? Shall we descend together into the dust? Job chapter 17 concludes Job's first speech in the second cycle of dialogues.

It is a very complicated passage to understand. Looking through the commentators, it becomes clear that they take greatly varying approaches to almost all of the verses. There is no clear consensus in how to understand Job's speech here.

Although human life is short, and Job's life also, there is no indication that Job's death is immediately imminent. However, at this point, Job might as well be dead. His continued existence is a form of living death.

His life only goes on under the Lord's great condemnation and judgment. He describes his spiritual breath as being broken. His existence continues, but as it were, he is no longer living.

[2 : 0 9] He is surrounded by people who mock him, which is clearly a cause of great grief to him. If he is mocked by the wicked, the sting of God's apparent moral governance of the world being turned upside down will only become more intense for him.

If he is mocked by the righteous, he will feel even more alone in his condition, being rejected and ostracized by people who should be his companions, who should recognize him as one of them.

No one seems to be prepared to take his side of the matter, to put up security for him. Once again, Job recognizes God's part in this situation. He has closed their hearts to understanding.

The fact that they don't see is a result of God's acting upon them. The second half of verse 4 may be Job calling upon the Lord not to let those who are standing against him as his accusers triumph. Verse 5 seems to describe the friends as traitors, as those who have abandoned the true role of a friend. In chapter 6, verses 14 to 16, for instance, Job had earlier described the friends as like traitors.

[3 : 1 0] He who withholds kindness from a friend forsakes the fear of the Almighty. My brothers are treacherous as a torrent bed, as torrential streams that pass away, which are dark with ice, and where the snow hides itself.

The meaning of the second half of verse 5 isn't clear. It might be an indication that the treachery of such persons ends up coming back upon them and their families. The Lord, once again, is behind all of this.

God, who promises on various occasions to make the name of righteous persons a blessing, has made the name of Job a byword among his society. A man once respected and honoured, and enjoying status among them, finds himself spat at and shamed.

With all of his trouble, he is wasting away. His eye is dim from his anguish. Verses 8 to 9 should probably be read as Job's somewhat ironic reference to the people who are accusing him. The people in question are probably upright and innocent, but they mistakenly regard Job as the godless. Ironically, Job's suffering is causing the righteous to become even more committed to their way.

[4 : 13] Job is a cautionary tale about ungodliness, a warning about what might happen if people reject the way of truth. Verse 10 is a difficult one to understand. Perhaps Job is telling his friends to repent, and to re-engage with a gentler approach, as he's found no wisdom among them.

Alternatively, it could be read as a taunt. Norman Harbell argues that verses 11 to 16 are a cry that together with chapter 16, verse 18 to 17, verse 1, bookends his second major complaint of verses 2 to 10.

Harbell sees this bookending as having a chiasmic or there and back again structure. The inmost element in both cases, in verse 1 and verse 11, is a three-line staccato cry of despair.

Verse 12 corresponds with chapter 16, verse 22, the portrait of verses 13 to 14, with the portrait of verses 20 to 21 of chapter 16. The matter of Job's hope is the subject of chapter 16, verse 19, and chapter 17, verse 15.

The earth of chapter 16, verse 18, corresponds with the dust and sheol of verse 16. As in verse 1, verse 11 describes the devastation of Job's existence.

[5 : 25] All of the things that would have given his life meaning have been destroyed or emptied out. Verse 12 is probably a reference to some of the plans that Job had. David Clines proposes the following reading of verses 11 and 12.

My days have passed, broken are my plans, the desires of my heart, which had turned night into day, brought light nearer than darkness. In chapter 14, verses 13 to 17, Job had wished that he would be hidden in Sheol until the Lord's anger passed.

Oh, that you would hide me in Sheol, that you would conceal me until your wrath be passed, that you would appoint me a set time and remember me. If a man dies, shall he live again?

All the days of my service I would wait till my renewal should come. You would call and I would answer you. You would long for the work of your hands, for then you would number my steps.

You would not keep watch over my sin. My transgression would be sealed up in a bag and you would cover over my iniquity. Verses 13 to 16 likely refer back to this hope, to his imagined course of going down to the grave, sheltering there until the appropriate time, where he would be raised again and the Lord would vindicate him and he would be restored in his relationship with God.

[6 : 39] Yet if Job goes down to the pit and identifies with the grave, calling the grave his father and treating the worm that consumes his rotting flesh as if it were his kin, what then becomes of his hope?

Could Job's hope survive the grave? A question to consider. Verses 8 to 9 probably describe righteous people who are looking at Job's situation, taking him for one of the ungodly and treating him as a cautionary example.

They may be righteous, but they lack wisdom. How might we describe the relationship between righteousness and wisdom in scripture? In what ways is it possible for a righteous man, nonetheless to be lacking in wisdom?

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