

Job 19: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Job chapter 19. Then Job answered and said, How long will you torment me, and break me in pieces with words? These ten times you have cast reproach upon me. Are you not ashamed to wrong me? And even if it be true that I have erred, my error remains with myself. If indeed you magnify yourselves against me, and make my disgrace an argument against me, know then that God has put me in the wrong, and closed his net about me. Behold, I cry out, Violence! But I am not answered. I call for help, but there is no justice. He has walled up my way, so that I cannot pass, and he has set darkness upon my paths. He has stripped from me my glory, and taken the crown from my head. He breaks me down on every side, and I am gone, and my hope has he pulled up like a tree. He has kindled his wrath against me, and counts me as his adversary. His troops come on together. They have cast up their siege ramp against me, and encamp around my tent. He has put my brothers far from me, and those who knew me are wholly estranged from me. My relatives have failed me. My close friends have forgotten me.

The guests in my house, and my maidservants count me as a stranger. I have become a foreigner in their eyes. I call to my servant, but he gives me no answer. I must plead with him with my mouth for mercy. My breath is strange to my wife, and I am a stench to the children of my own mother. Even young children despise me. When I rise, they talk against me. All my intimate friends abhor me, and those whom I loved have turned against me. My bones stick to my skin and to my flesh, and I have escaped by the skin of my teeth. Have mercy on me. Have mercy on me, O you my friends, for the hand of God has touched me.

Why do you, like God, pursue me? Why are you not satisfied with my flesh? O that my words were written. O that they were inscribed in a book. O that with an iron pen and lead they were engraved in the rock forever. For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth, and after my skin has been thus destroyed. Yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me. If you say, How we will pursue him? And the root of the matter is found in him. Be afraid of the sword, for wrath brings the punishment of the sword, that you may know there is a judgment.

Job chapter 19 is Job's second speech within the second cycle of dialogues. He begins by reproaching his friends for their part in his distress. By their accusations they have exacerbated Job's position. To the heavy blows that Job had received from the Lord, they added their false accusations. Supposing he had done something wrong, the fault was between him and God, and yet the friends are so eager to prosecute Job's fault, presenting themselves also as the appropriate arbiters of his case.

To their eyes, the evidence against Job is damning. What has befallen his family and household, and his own physical condition, all testify against him, that he is clearly in the wrong. This is a man struck by the Lord. Job presents his protest in verses 6 to 12. He is a man cornered, besieged, trapped by God. By his brutal actions against him, God has clearly presented Job as standing in the wrong. Job can call out in his distress and in his sense of injustice, but there is no one to answer him. His appeal won't be heard. The Lord has hemmed him in, walling up his way. Like an overthrown king, he has been stripped of his glory and crown. Like a defeated city whose fortifications have been broken down, the walls of Job's life have been breached. What hope he may have had has been uprooted like a tree. God is not just silent towards Job. All of his actions speak volumes.

[3 : 56] God is treating Job as an enemy, not just as someone who is ignored. And God's actions against Job are completely disproportionate. He is surrounded by siege works, and as it were encircled by an army.

But yet, in verse 12, he presents himself as no more than a tent. This is most extreme overkill. Throughout Job's complaints, it's important to notice that his concern is vindication and divine action on his behalf. He is not merely looking for a relief of his suffering. The greater part of his distress is not just his physical pain and his loss of his household and his children. It is the fact that he clearly stands under divine condemnation. A blameless and an upright man who fears God and eschews evil is cast off and cast out by the Lord, presented as wicked and to be rejected.

Besides the Lord's rejection, the Lord has brought about his rejection by all the other people of his society. Job's kin and his former acquaintances are now estranged from him. They avoid him. They ignore him, as the friends when they first visited seem to have ignored Job, refusing to acknowledge him.

People who once would have looked to him as a generous host or a kind master now treat him as a stranger. His servant no longer recognizes his authority and needs to be pleaded with for mercy.

[5 : 13] His breath, or perhaps his spirit, is strange even to his own wife. You can think back to chapter 2, verse 9. Then his wife said to him, Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die. He is abhorrent to the children of his mother, or perhaps even his own children. Although given the events of chapter 1, this more likely refers to his siblings. Even young children, who would be the lowest within the social structure, and would be without many of the social prejudices that adults had, despise him. When he rises up, he looks in their direction and he sees them talking about him. The people who were once nearest and dearest to him have now risen against him. They regard him as an outcast, a stranger, even an enemy.

It did not suffice that the Lord attacked him with his bitter blows. In addition to all of this, he conscripted all of these people who were closest to Job, the people that Job looked to and depended upon to join his cause against Job. This is bitter for Job indeed. Job's own body seems to have turned against him. And Job wonders at his friends. Why they pursue him? Isn't it enough for God to pursue him? Why do they also seem to need their pound of flesh? Back in chapter 9, verse 33, Job had spoken of his wish that there were someone to go between, him and God, a mediator, an arbiter, someone to present his case, perhaps. There is no arbiter between us, who might lay his hand on us both. In chapter 16, verses 19 to 21, Job had again wished for a witness.

In Norman Harbell's translation, Surely now my witness is in heaven. He who can testify for me is on high. Let him be my advocate, my friend before Eloah. Let him arbitrate between a mortal and Eloah, as between one human being and another. In chapter 14, verses 13 to 17, he had expressed his wish that he be hidden in Sheol until the time would come when he would be raised up and vindicated. 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. In verses 23 and 24, Job wishes that his case could be written down in the most indelible way, inscribed with an iron pen on rock, so that it would endure forever, so that Job would not just vanish from the earth, the injustice that he has suffered, forgotten. He wants it to be written in a book. Indeed, we are reading such a book, a book that records Job's situation. Verses 25 to 26 are some of the most famous verses in the book, but also some of the most difficult. A great deal of ink has been spilled on the question of what exactly is meant by these verses. Who is the Redeemer, for instance? Claiming that the Redeemer is God seems strange, given the fact that Job is making his case against God at this point. The Redeemer is more likely some third party, perhaps comparable to the accuser Satan that we see in the first two chapters. Looking at passages such as Zechariah chapter 3, it seems to me that the figure is most likely going to be the angel of the Lord. Job probably envisages a member of the divine council who will speak on his behalf, and while he has previously hoped for such justice to occur before he dies, here it seems that he expects to die before such a thing happens. However, the Redeemer lives. The Redeemer is a figure in the Old Testament who would continue the life of the family when it was put into threat or jeopardy. He would restore property to the family. He would avenge the blood of one slain in the family. He would marry the surviving widow of a brother that had died in order to continue his name. Job is hoping for such a figure to act on his behalf, a heavenly figure who will intercede for him, who will continue his name when it seems to be wiped out.

