

# Job 24: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[ 0 : 00 ] Job chapter 24. Why are not times of judgment kept by the Almighty? Or why do those who know him never see his days? Some move landmarks, they seize flocks and pasture them, they drive away the donkey of the fatherless, they take the widow's ox for a pledge, they thrust the poor off the road, the poor of the earth all hide themselves.

Behold, like wild donkeys in the desert, the poor go out to their toil seeking game, the wasteland yields food for their children, they gather their fodder in the field, and they glean the vineyard of the wicked man, they lie all night naked without clothing, and have no covering in the cold, they are wet with the rain of the mountains, and cling to the rock for lack of shelter.

There are those who snatch the fatherless child from the breast, and they take a pledge against the poor, they go about naked without clothing, hungry they carry the sheaves, among the olive rows of the wicked they make oil, they tread the winepresses but suffer thirst.

From out of the city the dying groan, and the soul of the wounded cries for help, yet God charges no one with wrong. There are those who rebel against the light, who are not acquainted with its ways, and do not stay in its paths.

The murderer rises before it is light, that he may kill the poor and needy, and in the night he is like a thief. The eye of the adulterer also waits for the twilight, saying, No eye will see me, and he veils his face.

[ 1 : 26 ] In the dark they dig through houses, by day they shut themselves up. They do not know the light, for deep darkness is morning to all of them, for they are friends with the terrors of deep darkness.

You say, Swift are they on the face of the waters, their portion is cursed in the land, no trader turns toward their vineyards. Drought and heat snatch away the snow waters, so do Sheol those who have sinned.

The womb forgets them, the worm finds them sweet, they are no longer remembered. So wickedness is broken like a tree. They wrong the barren childless woman, and do no good to the widow.

Yet God prolongs the life of the mighty by his power. They rise up when they despair of life. He gives them security, and they are supported, and his eyes are upon their ways. They are exalted a little while, and then are gone.

They are brought low and gathered up like all others. They are cut off like the heads of grain. If it is not so, who will prove me a liar, and show that there is nothing in what I say?

[ 2 : 27 ] Job chapter 24 presents the reader with a number of difficulties. Francis Anderson summarises the problems. First, there are lots of knotty textual difficulties. Secondly, there is the apparent incoherence of the speech as it stands.

Thirdly, parts of the speech seem to be out of keeping with what Job has argued elsewhere, and with his position more generally. The anomalous elements of this chapter have led some scholars to consider them in light of anomalous features of the third cycle of speeches more generally. There is, for instance, no final speech of Zophar the Naamathite, who spoke last in the preceding two cycles. Bildad's speech is also very short. Job's concluding speech, by contrast, is exceedingly long.

Cyril Rod, for instance, argues that this is evidence, that the text is unfinished or otherwise at odds with the author's intention. Gerald Janssen, remarking upon this possibility, observes, perhaps there is something to be said for leaving an ancient work partly in ruins, and for allowing each reader to reconstruct the outlines of the original edifice with the use of one's own imagination, informed as it may become through careful study of what still remains intact.

Some have speculated that material from one or both of the speeches of Bildad, or a missing speech of Zophar, has ended up here. David Clines holds the latter position, and moves verses 18 to 24 to follow chapter 27, verse 17.

[ 3 : 51 ] Others have argued that there might be a mixture of material from disparate sources here, and no real unity. While highlighting these questions, Anderson presents a reading of the passage that, without ironing over its difficulties, invites the reader to read it as it stands.

However, other commentators have taken different approaches. As already noted, Clines reads verses 18 to 24 as not belonging to the speech, but being wrongly transposed into it from elsewhere.

He mentions Doom and Forer as holding the position that the chapter is in fact a series of independent poems. Others have suggested that the chapter may be a poem written by the author of the book, punctuating the text and drawing together some of its themes.

John Hartley largely maintains the text as it stands, and reads the whole thing as the words of Job, while making some minor changes like transposing verse 9, which is placed in parentheses in the ESV translation, to before verse 4.

Norman Harbell argues for the literary unity of the chapter, but believes that it should likely be seen as the words of Zophar, observing what he believes are parallels with the themes of Zophar's statements in chapter 20, and that the coherence of the passage may better be understood if we appreciate that Zophar is making a few concessions along the way.

[ 5 : 07 ] He argues that if we look at some of the features of the opening verses of the chapter and compare those with the closing ones, we will see enough parallels and connections to substantiate a literary unity to the whole.

Other commentators raise even further possibilities, once again not without their problems. Some have read verses 18 to 24 as extended quotations by Job of his friends or accusers.

Anderson suggests that most of the final verses might even be read as an imprecation or curse. Reading it as an imprecatory appeal for God's justice in such a situation, rather than a declaration of the way that things usually work, would definitely be more in keeping with what we have seen of Job's position to this point.

Janssen argues that there is in fact a quotation, but it is only verses 18 to 20, with the verses that follow being Job's response. He remarks more generally upon the problems that we can find in these concluding chapters of the third cycle.

There is another possibility which, though it is not here adopted, may be mentioned simply to enlarge the reader's sense of the options. It may be that the author has deliberately dissolved the otherwise orderly sequence of statements and counter-statements into a confused tangle of incoherent voices, a formal way of paralleling the argument of Job that the hedge against chaos has given way, and that disorder and evil in the world make clear understandings impossible.

[ 6 : 28 ] Such a device would admirably prepare the way for the sceptical statement in chapter 28, before Job recovers himself with the integrative verbal actions of chapters 29 to 31.

Of the positions on offer, I am more inclined to go with Anderson and Janssen in reading the whole chapter as a unity, and as the words of Job. With Janssen, I lean towards taking verses 18 to 20 as Job's quotation of his friends, with the verses that follow being Job's own response.

Harbel argues that verses 1 to 17 are Zophar's presentation of the problem that he is going to address in the verses that follow. Along the way, he is making some concessions to Job's position, recognising some validity in what he is seeing.

I would argue, rather, that we would be better off reading these as the words of Job throughout. Job is again presenting the problem of divine justice, but broadening it. The friends have been talking about the fate of the wicked, and he is broadening the question somewhat, to relate to the problem of the law's justice not being forthcoming, not just in his own case, but in numerous cases of oppression more generally.

Verses 2 to 4 describe actions of the oppressors, moving landmarks to take property that is not their own, sheep-stealing, oppressing widows and orphans by requiring the animals by which they would make their living as a pledge.

[ 7 : 46 ] Thrusting the poor off the road may be a way of speaking about squeezing them out of the economy. The result of this oppression is described in the verses that follow, in verses 5 to 11. The oppressed poor can barely scavenge enough to survive.

They suffer from exposure to the elements. They are hungry and thirsty. While the wicked are prospering, the poor that they are oppressing have to glean what scant remnants they can from the fields and vineyards of the wicked.

Where is God in all of this? The oppressed, the dying, the wounded, are crying out, and yet no one seems to listen to them. God does not seem to remember them in their plight. The Lord had forbidden these specific forms of oppression within the law, but he doesn't seem to be acting to enforce the justice that he prescribes.

Verses 13 to 17 describe the oppressors themselves. They are, in this portrayal, figures associated with darkness. The murderer, the thief, and the adulterer are all figures who operate by night. They may break the three greatest commandments of the second table of the law, yet God does not seem to act against them. The darkness being referred to here doesn't merely relate to literal darkness.

[ 8 : 50 ] It seems to also relate to the darkness that exists in the absence of divine justice. Where God's actions in bringing the wicked to account are not seen, there is darkness. And this darkness, Job argues, is a cover for the wicked.

They take refuge in this darkness, while the righteous long for it to be broken with the advent of the days of the Lord. The difficult closing section of the chapter, verses 18 to 24 particularly, are, I believe, best read as Janssen reads them.

Verses 18 to 20 is a quote of the position of the friends. Janssen remarks that Job has already quoted his friends in places like chapter 21, verses 19 and possibly verse 22.

The statement concerns the certainty of the judgment that will befall the wicked. The grave will seize them just as naturally as drought and heat melt up the snow waters. They will be consumed in their graves and forgotten by the land of the living.

Yet Job, hearkening back to the portrayal of the wicked oppressor within this chapter, points out that they can do all these forms of oppression, and yet their lives are prolonged. They seem to be given security by God.

[ 9 : 53 ] Yes, their life is short, but when they die, they die just like anyone else. Despite all of their oppression, they do not seem to be singled out in any particular way. Far from being cut down by the Lord, they leave just like the righteous.

Job concludes by challenging the friends to oppose the position. If he is indeed wrong in his claims, he wants them to prove it. What is he missing or misrepresenting? A question to consider.

In this chapter, Job's consideration of his condition opens up to a broader consideration of the condition of the righteous and the wicked more generally. Where else have we seen this happening to this point?

And how do Job's particular struggles give us a vantage point upon the problem of evil and the suffering of the righteous and the prosperity of the wicked more generally?