

Job 29: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 30 April 2021

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Job chapter 29. And Job again took up his discourse and said, O that I were as in the months of old, as in the days when God watched over me, when his lamps shone upon my head, and by his light I walked through darkness, as I was in my prime, when the friendship of God was upon my tent, when the Almighty was yet with me, when my children were all around me, when my steps were washed with butter, and the rock poured out for me streams of oil, when I went out to the gate of the city, when I prepared my seat in the square, the young men saw me and withdrew, and the aged rose and stood.

The princes refrained from talking, and laid their hand on their mouth. The voice of the nobles was hushed, and their tongue stuck to the roof of their mouth. When the ear heard it called me blessed, and when the eyes saw it approved, because I delivered the poor who cried for help, and the fatherless who had none to help him.

The blessing of him who was about to perish came upon me, and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy. I put on righteousness, and it clothed me. My justice was like a robe in a turban. I was eyes to the blind, and feet to the lame. I was a father to the needy, and I searched out the cause of him whom I did not know. I broke the fangs of the unrighteous, and made him drop his prey from his teeth.

Then I thought, I shall die in my nest, and I shall multiply my days as the sand. My roots spread out to the waters, with the dew all night on my branches, my glory fresh with me, and my bow ever new in my hand.

[1 : 36] Men listened to me and waited, and kept silence from my counsel. After I spoke they did not speak again, and my word dropped upon them. They waited for me as for the rain, and they opened their mouths as for the spring rain.

I smiled on them, when they had no confidence, and the light of my face they did not cast down. I chose their way, and sat as chief, and I lived like a king among his troops, like one who comforts mourners.

In Job chapter 29, Job recollects his former condition and estate, when he was honoured among the people, when he enjoyed rule and authority among them, when he was blessed with prosperity, the Lord's favour, and surrounded with the joyful life of his household.

This chapter should not be abstracted from everything else that surrounds it. For instance, it looks back to chapter 27 and Job's oath maintaining his righteousness. It looks back to chapter 28, at the end of which we were told wisdom for man is turning away from evil and fearing God.

In this chapter, in the actions of Job during the period of his prosperity, we see that he was such a person. In this portrayal, Job is also presenting himself to God, declaring himself innocent of the great wrongs that would have brought such disaster upon him.

[2 : 48] It relates to the chapter that immediately follows by contrast. Seen against the backdrop of his former condition, Job's present lamentable estate is set forth in sharpest relief.

Finally, it relates to Job's oath of innocence in chapter 31, with which he concludes his speeches. Job's denial that he is guilty of a series of particular crimes that could be imputed to him corresponds with his positive description of his former actions within this chapter.

Job is not just soliloquizing at this point. This relates to his formal complaint. He is asserting his innocence. The chapter is an important one for other reasons. It gives us a portrait of what righteousness looks like.

Francis Anderson writes, Job's review of his life is one of the most important documents in scripture for the study of Israelite ethics. His positive sketch of life at its best, chapter 29, and his negative confession, chapter 31, indicate the loftiest moral standards.

For him, right conduct is almost entirely social. His private duty to himself as a man is not discussed. His duty to God in the cult is touched on only in the matter of idolatry, chapter 31, verse 26 and following, an important but negative matter.

[3 : 59] In Job's conscience, sins are not just wrong things people do, disobeying known laws of God or society. To omit to do good to any fellow human being of whatever rank or class would be a grievous offence to God.

Anderson's point is an important one. Job's portrayal of himself here is of a man who is working righteousness and establishing justice within his society, not just someone who is being righteous for his own sake.

Job's righteousness is creative and restorative, not just the pale righteousness of avoidance of sins. In such righteousness, Job is reflecting something of God's own character of righteousness.

God is the one who judges and brings justice to his people, something that is integral to a vision of righteous rule more generally. The idealized just man is a man of strength and substance, a man with the might and authority to frustrate the actions of the oppressors, and with the means to raise up the poor.

He is a just warrior and a gracious comforter, a man who has power, but a man who uses that power for the sake of those who have none. Gerald Janssen remarks upon the similarities between Job's self-portrayal and the description of the ideal king in places like Psalm 72.

[5 : 10] In Psalm 72 verse 1 to 7, And then in verses 11 to 15, May all kings fall down before him, all nations serve him, for he delivers the needy when he calls, the poor and him who has no helper.

He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence he redeems their life, and precious is their blood in his sight. Long may he live.

May gold of Sheba be given to him. May prayer be made for him continually, and blessings invoked for him all the day. As in the case of the righteous Davidic king of Psalm 72, in Job's portrayal here, his wealth is not envied by other people, nor is his prosperity resented.

Rather, they are seen as a blessing for the whole people, because he is using his might and his strength for the sake of the upbuilding of everyone. Through his strength and authority, he can act on behalf of the poor.

He can achieve and enact justice for the oppressed. Looking back on his former estate from his present condition is a painful experience for Job, though. As he looks back, he perceives how much he has lost.

[6 : 49] Things that were once a source of comfort to him, the fact that God watched over him, for instance, are now attended with a sense of menace. In chapter 10, verse 14, If I sin, you watch me, and do not acquit me of my iniquity.

Much as in the enumeration of Job's blessings and riches in Job chapter 1, the favour of God was held above everything else. The way that he related to God was the most important thing.

Here again we see that it is the friendship of God that really marked out these former days. He enjoyed the friendship of God and consequently enjoyed all these other benefits. Now it seems that has been lost completely.

He describes in hyperbolic language the blessings that he enjoyed of the earth. We might think of the way that the land of promise was described as a land flowing with milk and honey. Here his steps are washed with butter, connected with the milk.

The rock pours out streams of oil. Perhaps this is the olive press. Perhaps we might also, as Norman Harbell suggests, hear something of an allusion to God as the rock in this particular expression.

[7 : 51] Job, now cruelly accused by his friends, looks back on the status that he once enjoyed in the society. Although Job was not yet old, Eliphaz back in chapter 15 verse 10 said, Both the grey-haired and the aged are among us, older than your father.

He nonetheless enjoyed an honour and a status above his years. When he went to the gate of the city, the place of judgment, he was honoured above all others and by all others. The assertive young men stood back before him.

The wise sages stood up from their seats. The rulers closed their mouths and the men of substance within the society were hushed. Everyone respected Job and wanted to hear what he had to say.

Eliphaz, back in chapter 22 verses 6-9, made some serious allegations against Job. For you have exacted pledges of your brothers for nothing and stripped the naked of their clothing.

You have given no water to the weary to drink, and you have withheld bread from the hungry. The man with power possessed the land, and the favoured man lived in it. You have sent widows away empty, and the arms of the fatherless were crushed.

[8 : 53] Job here gives the most contrary testimony. Far from being guilty of the things that Eliphaz has accused him of, he was an exemplar of virtuous rule. And given the public nature of the acts that he is describing, none of this should be hard to substantiate.

If Job were in fact lying, it could easily be exposed. In his character as a righteous ruler, Job reflects the character that God himself is supposed to have, and which has been called into question by his experience.

He delivered the poor who cried for help. Will God deliver him when he is a poor man crying for help? Job acted on behalf of those in sorest distress. His righteousness was proactive.

It took the initiative. It repaired those things that were broken, and lifted up those people who were downcast. Job describes himself as putting on righteousness and it clothing him, his justice being like a robe and a turban.

This is language that might remind us of the way that God's justice is spoken of in places like Isaiah chapter 59 verse 17. He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head.

[9 : 55] He put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in zeal as a cloak. Job's justice, his enacting of justice, and the effectual outworking of his justice in his society is as obvious as the clothes that he is wearing.

This virtue in action is something that he becomes so identified with that is like the clothes on his back. He was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. His strength was the strength of those who had no strength of their own.

The father was an especially important character. It was not just the emotional relationship that he had with his family. It was the fact that through his might, the family was protected, provided for, and justice was enacted for them.

Scripture is particularly concerned for the characters of the widow and the fatherless, those who lack a strong and faithful man to act on their behalf. God himself is a father to those who are fatherless.

Those who lack anyone to act on their behalf find that God makes their cause his own. Job was not a lazy judge either. He sought out causes. They didn't just have to come to him. He diligently applied himself to the activity.

[10 : 58] He used his strength to bring down oppressors. He broke the teeth of the unrighteous and delivered their prey from their mouths. In this situation, Job had a confidence that the Lord was blessing and smiling upon him.

He was acting as a representative of God, in God's name, and in a way that reflected God's own character. He believed that he would die in his nest. His days would be multiplied.

Some have argued that the word translated as sand in the ESV should be translated as phoenix, it being a reference to the myth of that particular bird that could be restored to new life and renewed to its youth.

His roots would spread out to the waters. He would be like a blessed tree. We've had a number of images of trees within the book of Job. Job has already wondered whether, like a tree, he might be revived to new life after what seems like his final end.

In this former period of his life, his glory was fresh with him. He was surrounded, as it were, with a halo of honour and blessing. His bow, his physical strength, was ever new in his hand.

[11 : 59] He returns in the concluding verses of the chapter to the former status of honour and power that he enjoyed in the society. In matters of dispute and debate, he was the final word.

His words were longed for as those which would settle a matter and give insight and wisdom. His benevolence was something that caused the whole society to rejoice in him. Indeed, he was the one that set the course of the society.

He sat as a chief. He was the king among the troops. He was the one with the authority and the rule and the might. But he was also the one who comforts mourners. He was not lifted up in his heart above the people.

He was their brother, the one who acted as their great kinsman-redeemer. All of this, however, is far in the past. Job's condition now seems completely otherwise. Who will act as a redeemer for him?

Is God a righteous judge and king, comforter of the oppressed and the weak and the needy, in the way that Job once was? A question to consider.

[12 : 57] Where else in scripture do we have such portrayals of righteous kings and rulers and ideal visions of the inaction of justice within the ancient world? What might we learn from such portrayals about justice in our own situations?

