

Job 14: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 16 April 2021

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[0 : 0 0] Job chapter 14. Man who is born of a woman is few of days and full of trouble. He comes out like a flower and withers. He flees like a shadow and continues not. And do you open your eyes on such a one, and bring me into judgment with you? Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? There is not one. Since his days are determined, and the number of his months is with you, and you have appointed his limits that he cannot pass. Look away from him, and leave him alone, that he may enjoy like a hired hand his day. For there is hope for a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again, and that its shoots will not cease. Though its root grow old in the earth, and its stump die in the soil, yet at the scent of water it will bud, and put out branches like a young plant. But a man dies, and is laid low. Man breathes his last, and where is he? As waters fail from a lake, and a river wastes away and dries up, so a man lies down and rises not again. Till the heavens are no more, he will not awake, or be roused out of his sleep. O 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. But the mountain falls and crumbles away, and the rock is removed from its place. The waters wear away the stones. The torrents wash away the soil of the earth. So you destroy the hope of man. You prevail forever against him, and he passes. You change his countenance and send him away. His sons come to honor, and he does not know it. They are brought low, and he perceives it not. He feels only the pain of his own body, and he mourns only for himself.

Job chapter 14 concludes the first cycle of discourses. In the preceding chapter, Job had declared his intent of calling God to deal with him and his case face to face.

In this chapter, Job continues to speak of his situation, and a small note of hope emerges midway through. Over the course of the chapter, Job uses a number of pieces of nature imagery, and they move from the weakest to the strongest, as Norman Harville observes, from flowers and shadows, to trees, to lakes and rivers, to mountains. Man is a weak and immortal creature. The chapter opens with Job exploring this point. Man's days are few, and they have little to offer but difficulty and trouble. Job's words at this point might remind us of places like Psalm 90, verses 5-6 and 9-10.

You sweep them away as with a flood. They are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning. In the morning it flourishes and is renewed. In the evening it fades and withers.

For all our days pass away under your wrath. We bring our years to an end like a sigh. The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty, yet their span is but toil and trouble. They are soon gone, and we fly away. Though man may bloom beautifully like a flower, his glory is but fragile and short-lasting, and it soon passes away. He is insubstantial and fleeting like a shadow, leaving no mark behind him. Harbel argues that verse 3 refers to the opening of God's eyes upon Job's situation, to God's response to Job's request that he come into judgment with him.

[3 : 38] John Hartley, by contrast, argues that this needs to be read against the mismatch between God and his creature. Job is asking why the great and transcendent Creator would fix his gaze in such a devastating way upon one of his weak and frail creatures. In chapter 4, in the first of the speeches of the friends, Eliphaz had argued that next to God, no human being or mortal could be pure.

The meaning of verse 4 is difficult to determine, but this thought may lie in the background of it. As a mere mortal, Job cannot hope to survive if he is judged according to the holiness of a transcendent God. Against the utter brilliance of God's glory, the smallest imperfection in Job would be exposed in the most glaring and unforgiving of ways.

God has set limits for the life of man, a span for his days, like the limits set upon the sea. Job wishes that within these limits, the Lord would spare him as his frail servant from the consuming power of his gaze. No creature can withstand it. If man must live a life of toil, then at the least he desires that the Lord let him alone while he does so.

Back in chapter 8, Bildad the Shuhite had presented his analogy of the two plants. In verses 16 to 19 of that chapter, He is a lush plant before the sun, and his shoots spread over his garden. His roots entwine the stone heap. He looks upon a house of stones. If he is destroyed from his place, then it will deny him, saying, I have never seen you. Behold, this is the joy of his way, and out of the soil others will spring. While many commentators have read this as an extension of Bildad's image of a single destroyed plant, Robert Gordas and others following him argue that there are two plants being referred to here, and that the second plant is one that is destroyed and then rises up again. Job explores a similar image in verses 7 and following of this chapter. There's a tree that is cut down, and yet there is hope that it might sprout again. New life can emerge even from its seemingly old root and dead stump. However, man is quite different from such a tree. If a man dies, is there such hope for him?

His life is like dried up water, leaving behind a dead and desert place. There is no seeming hope of his being revived. At this point in the chapter, and in Job's speech, there is, as it were, a break in the storm clouds. For a moment, a shard of the sunlight of hope comes through. It comes in the form of a thought about death and resurrection. Job has just given the example of the tree that dies and can rise again, and now he goes on to imagine what it would be like if he could do the same. For the duration of the time of God's burning wrath and anger, Job wishes that he could be hidden in Sheol, that he might, as it were, take refuge in the grave. He would be concealed, and when the fierce storm of God's anger passed, the Lord would have set a time for hearing Job's case, would remember him, and he would come forth. If there were such a hope, Job would be prepared to live out the rest of his life, no matter how difficult the period of service might be. He would lie in his grave, waiting for the summons, and the Lord would call, and his creature would answer him. While he had once treated him harshly, the Lord would long for his creation, and as Job answered his creator's call, he would come forth, and the Lord would have forgotten his sin. The Lord would now watch over him, but not for judgment, for blessing. His transgressions, his faults, and his impurities would all be covered over, and the Lord would smile upon Job. And yet this bright parting of the clouds only lasts for a short while. Soon Job falls into shadow again. Mountains and rocks are symbols of strength and power and endurance, of those things that are toughest and most resilient. And even if man's hope were like those things, they will be worn away by the battering might of the Lord that erodes all before it. God ultimately prevails, even over all the hopes of man. Man is sent away. He ends up in

[7 : 35] Sheol, where he is cut off from the land of the living. He does not know the fate of those that have come after him. He is trapped in bitter pain and mourning, with no hope to anticipate. This contrasts with Job's earlier description of the realm of the dead, in chapter 3 verses 17 to 19, where he longed to be released into it. There the wicked cease from troubling, and there the weary are at rest.

There the prisoners are at ease together. They hear not the voice of the taskmaster. The small and the great are there, and the slave is free from his master. A question to consider, what are some of the earliest passages evidencing a hope of resurrection in the scripture?